

ZAPPON

Illustration by
Yasumo

BANISHED FROM THE HERO'S PARTY,

I Decided to Live a **Quiet Life**
in the Countryside

8





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Prologue Thus Spoke God

Chapter 1 To Convey the Meaning in a Slow Life

Interlude The Hero Destroys Evil

Chapter 2 A Long Vacation

Chapter 3 Everything for Divine Blessings

Chapter 4 Goodwill and Malice

Chapter 5 The Trials of the Hero

Epilogue One Who Guides the Hero

Illustration: Yasumo
Design Work: Shindousha

“It’s so hot today.”





Escarlata Dias (Esta)

A mysterious mercenary who wears a mask.
Hired for her strength and experience to support Van the Hero. World-wise and the party's source of support.

Cardinal Ljubo

One of the key figures of leadership in the holy church. A big man, well over two meters tall. Van the Hero's ambitious guardian.

Van of Flamberge

A second Hero.
The last prince of a country destroyed by the demon lord's army. Possessed of a faith and sense of justice stronger than anyone's, he is a Hero who affirms both God and Divine Blessings.

Lavender

A small fairy. She met Van in a secret grove, fell in love with him, and pushed her way into the party. She is free-spirited and does not care about people. Van alone is special to her.

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Illustration by
Yasumo

YEN
ON
New York

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Banished from the Hero's Party, I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside, Vol. 8

Zappon

Translation by Dale DeLucia

Cover art by Yasumo

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SHIN NO NAKAMA JYANAI TO YUUSHA NO PARTY WO
 OIDASARETANODE, HENKYOU DE SLOW—LIFE SURUKOTO NI
 SHIMASHITA Vol. 8

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CHARACTERS



Red
(Gideon Ragnason)

Kicked out of the Hero's party, he headed to the frontier to live a slow life. Excluding Ruti, he's one of humanity's greatest swordsmen, with many feats to his name.



Rit
(Rizlet of Loggervia)

The princess of the Duchy of Loggervia and a former adventurer hailed as a hero. Now she is a truly happy young woman who grew out of her more combative phase. She's excited to go on a vacation with Red.



Ruti Ragnason

Red's younger sister and possessor of the Divine Blessing of the Hero, humanity's strongest blessing. Free at last from her blessing's impulses, she now enjoys life in Zoltan as a medicinal herb farmer while adventuring on the side.



Tisse Garland

A young girl with the Divine Blessing of the Assassin. An elite from the Assassins Guild, she is taking a break from her usual job and working together with Ruti to get their medicinal herb farm running.



Yarandrala

A high elf Singer of the Trees capable of controlling plants. Brimming with endless curiosity, she has been on countless adventures during her long life.



Danan LeBeau

Humanity's strongest Martial Artist. He's overjoyed that he's finally done recovering. A natural muscle-head who doesn't understand the concept of a slow life.

Albert Leland

Bears the Divine Blessing of the Champion, and was once a hero in Zoltan. He is now Escarlata's follower. He's headed for Zoltan to let Red and his friends know about Van the Hero.

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Prologue

Thus Spoke God

The Republic of Zoltan.

It can be found by following the road from the eastern border of the Kingdom of Avalonia. The region sits between the great unexplored mountains known as the Wall at the End of the World and the southern sea that is home to storms and enormous monsters.

In this world of unending war of God's design, where the only recourse is to fight, Zoltan has managed to evade the larger battles by lacking any strategic value.

In the Hero's story, the only role Zoltan plays is as the forgotten place where the queen consort Mispia of Veronia is hiding.

The Veronian royal court.

Ruti the Hero stood before Dowager Queen Leonor and the newly coronated King Yuzuk.

"Even if you are the Hero, to force your way into the throne room with a sword at your waist is not something that can be forgiven."

A brilliant ruby ring on the dowager queen's finger stuck out as she pointed at Ruti and her company. The queen's aged appearance, the way she adorned herself in jewels, and how her face twisted in a snarl made her resemble depictions of witches in old legends.

The Veronian knights stood at the edges of the room with hands at their sword hilts, staring down the Hero's party.

Ares the Sage and Tisse the Assassin recoiled slightly at the wave of hostility, while Prince Kiffa the Weapon Master raised his shield as if to cover the two of them.

Yarandrala the Singer of the Trees didn't so much as bat an eye at the knights, staring only at Yuzuk on the throne and Leonor beside him.

Yarandrala's hatred for the demon lord's army had grown more intense since Gideon's death, never fading, even at rest.

"Dowager Queen Leonor, we have come to correct your mistake."

Ruti gazed at Leonor with red eyes that never wavered.

The dowager queen, enraged, screamed, yet Ruti's expression

didn't falter.

The door behind Ruti blew open with a slam.

"Silence, Leonor."

With that sharp rebuke, Prince Salius, in the prime of his life, entered with his soldiers, followed by a high elf wearing an eye patch—Admiral Lilinrala—and one other.

"S-sister?! You're supposed to be dead!"

The last to enter with Salius was Misphia, whom Ruti and her party had brought along with them on their airship.

"Hmph, I survived lo these many years that I might finally see this day."

"What are you getting at?!"

"This is the day your evil deeds are finally brought to an end! Hero, let the truth be known!"

Ruti pulled an ancient-looking mirror from her cloak.

"Mirror of Larael, unveil the evil that lies hidden!"

Ruti pointed the mirror at King Yuzuk.

"Argh!"

King Yuzuk had worn a confident smile thus far, but when he saw the looking glass, he scrambled to conceal his face.

However, it was too late.

The visage of a horned demon appeared in the mirror.

"Gh! Gaaaaah!!!"

King Yuzuk's body bubbled, swelled, and transformed into a demon with twisted horns.

"A contract demon!" Ares shouted at the sight of the creature.

In reality, the king was a monstrous contract demon.

"Eeeek!" Leonor swooned at the sight of her son becoming a horrible monster.

"Accursed Hero! How dare you!"

"Contract demon! You deceived Dowager Queen Leonor and sought to take over the Kingdom of Veronia!"

"Deceived? How rude. I simply granted her wish. King Yuzuk's spirit resides within me yet. Although, he can no longer move a pinky of his own volition." The contract demon laughed and then glared at the Hero. "You've ruined everything. There is no greater humiliation for a contract demon than to be exposed! You shall feel the full wrath of one hailed as an equal to a member of the four heavenly kings!"

"He's attacking! Get to safety, Misphia!"

Ruti drew her holy blade, and the rest of her comrades moved into position.

Clad in flames born of a swelling magic power, the contract demon leaped at the Hero's party.



It was a fierce battle.

Ruti the Hero sheathed her sword and walked over to Leonor.

The woman was sobbing, collapsed on the ground.

“Dowager Queen.”

“...Yes?”

“The demon is gone now.”

“Thank you. At the very least, I won’t become the foolish ruler who destroyed her own nation.”

“You will now be judged by Veronian law.”

“I imagine it will be the death penalty. I’ve accepted that much. After the terrible crimes I’ve committed... After having killed my own beloved child...”

Sadness crossed Ruti’s face.

“To think the Hero would feel sorrow for one so foolish,” the dowager queen remarked.

“You regret your sins.”

“...I lost my beloved son to my lust for power. Hero, please share my story with the world. This is the fate of those who betray humanity.”

“Dowager Queen...”

“Here...” Leonor passed a key to Ruti.

“What is this?”

“The previous king stole the demon lord’s ship, the *Vendidad*, from the dark continent. This is the key to control it. You’ll find a map for crossing the waters to the dark continent in that old vessel.”

“!”

“It’s impossible to pass through the demon lord’s storms in an airship, but you should be able to reach the dark continent with the *Vendidad*.”

“...Thank you very much, Dowager Queen Leonor.”

“Hero, please save the...world!” Leonor drew the slender sword at her hip and thrust it at Ruti’s chest.

The Hero’s expression was unchanged as blood trickled from her lips and the world lost color and went still.

Leonor’s old body grew young, returning to the form it had possessed when she died. Her weak, dull eyes regained their fiery vitality.

“What did you hope to convey by showing me this? That this is what my life should have been?”

Leonor looked up at the sky, at the inextinguishable gleaming light.

There was something in the middle of that radiance, but it could

not be perceived by human eyes.

“Demis.”

Leonor’s eyes burned, yet she stared straight at the almighty.

The Veronian throne room disappeared, replaced by a single, unbranching path.

Leonor stood alone, facing off against God.

Merely glimpsing that light was enough to fill anyone with awe.

It evoked a desire to follow, to kneel, to lower one’s head to the ground in obedience.

“Being deceived by a demon, saved by the Hero, and experiencing a change of heart before peacefully accepting my execution was to have been my life. Are you implying that was my happy ending? Your efforts are pointless. I have no regrets at all about the way I lived.”

Leonor did not yield. Even in the face of the divine, her will, the very thing that led her to rebel against the world at every turn, was firm.

“This is a waste of time. I have no need for saving and no need for mercy. It’s a repulsive thing. Sentence me to a reborn life as a worm or toss me into whatever hell you please.”

“My beloved child,” Demis said.

Blood flowed from Leonor’s ears. The voice was greater than all of humanity crying as one. Demis’s words were too mighty for a mortal.

Although Leonor’s eardrums burst, God’s voice still reached her.

The woman’s eyes grew bloodshot, and she gritted her teeth to endure it, but still she did not bend her knee.

Demis continued, “My beloved child, you have gone astray.”

“No, I made no such mistake. As I’ve already told you, I bear no regrets.”

“O foolish child, o child on an idle journey, you are still loved by God.”

The divine’s voice was filled with affection.

Leonor sneered. “You would even love me. Truly, God is kind. But I do not love you.”

Her resolve would not falter.

Face-to-face with God and confronted with the possibility of annihilation, she refused to alter her way of life. To reject having lived as an evil woman to her heart’s content would be to lose herself. Accepting what Demis had shown her, becoming that weak being clinging to the Hero who called herself Leonor: an eternity of torture in hell was preferable.

“No,” spoke God.

Leonor wondered what he meant. Looking down at the straight path she walked upon, she hit upon a doubt.

“Demis, would you perhaps answer me one question? How far

does this path go before it forks?"

As far as she could see, it was a single line in both directions.
If there was a hell, the path would have to branch somewhere.

"Leonor, o wise child. What you suspect is indeed the truth."

"You can't mean..."

"No matter how my children live, the course is unchanged."

"So there's no such thing as hell."

"On this path, you shall be reborn as a badger. That is already set."

"Then is there any meaning at all in people's lives? Good and evil? What was the point of all those who lived as obedient servants to your blessings?"

"Yes, my child. People's lives have meaning. I wish to save all members of my cherished flock. All of you are loved, my child. From the bottom of my heart."

Leonor's form broke apart.

She was transforming back into a pure soul without will or memories.

With the last bits of her persona, Leonor continued to observe and consider what was happening.

And at last...

"Now I understand the point of the Hero."

...Leonor arrived at one answer.

"Congratulations, my child. Were you born as the Hero, I am sure there would have been salvation. For that alone, I am sorry. When you eventually become the Hero and return to me, let us speak again."

Leonor no longer had a mouth, or words, or intelligence.

Her soul gradually lost its form, but she stared at God until the final moment.

"Farewell, my beloved child. My love and the blessing that will support you shall ever be at your side."

Demis peered out over the world spread endlessly around him.

Countless souls flowed along their paths.

And amid all of them, there was one special entity.

That soul gave off a light different from the sort that God desired.

The almighty grieved that things did not go as intended.

Thus, when the Hero went off her path, God touched the world, if only for an instant.

Seeing that one other soul now gleamed, Demis smiled in satisfaction.



God's love flowed into a certain monastery in the southern part of the Kingdom of Avalonia.

There, a lone boy knelt before the altar and offered up a prayer.

This child was the prince of a fallen nation. He'd lost his homeland and family to the demon lord's army and had no one left.

Van of Flamberge, the youngest child of the King of Flamberge, had not yet been consumed by hatred. He prayed with a tranquil heart.

Lord Demis, please accept my devotion. Let my life be lived by your will.

His prayer was not a request, but an offering.

Following the favorite motto of the friar who'd taught him, Van wanted nothing from God. Instead, he offered his life in obedience to the almighty's teachings.

Perhaps that's why the miracle occurred.

One day, Van became the Hero.

Divine Blessings were gifts from God, exactly as the name implied.

And although Van was stunned by this transformation, he didn't hesitate.

His life was in service of Demis's will.

Van began to act as the Hero should.

First, he sought for the church to validate his Divine Blessing.

The boy left the monastery, journeying to the Last Wall fortress.

Thus did Van the Hero's adventure begin.

Chapter 1

To Convey the Meaning in a Slow Life

Rit and I walked together through the trees on the outskirts of town.

The gentle rays of the springtime sun shone through the leaves, and a gentle floral breeze wafted.

Seeing Rit smiling happily, I couldn't help grinning, too.

It was a peaceful moment in time.

"We sure picked a lot!" Rit cheerfully carried a basket filled with fairy apples in both hands.

Normal apples were picked in fall and winter, but the fairy ones were spring fruits.

They looked and tasted a lot like regular apples, but they were grown from a completely different species of plant. The name came from someone who found the bright red fruit growing out of season and reasoned that a gluttonous brownie must have tricked the trees into producing apples.

These fruits tasted a bit sweeter than regular apples and could be eaten fresh, made into jam, or even fermented into cider. They were a common treat during spring in Zoltan.

"There weren't any fairy apples in Loggervia, so I can't wait!" Rit beamed as she looked at the contents of her basket.

I'm going to have to make some dishes to live up to those expectations...

My mind was hard at work devising all the ways to use fairy apples in dishes.

Apple pie, apple potage, maybe a meat dish to go with some apple sauce...

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Having survived its first war since its founding, Zoltan returned to its rightful place as a boring backwater.

Following the conflict, merchant ships had come to port quite frequently, but that had since died down. Now it was back to the regular humdrum.

People giddy over the taste of victory swiftly forgot that passion as spring arrived and their workloads increased. They returned to their usual balance of responsibilities and procrastination.

I even saw a man sitting and smoking in front of a field that he still hadn't touched.

It looked like he'd decided that making it to the plot was enough for today. He could always start working properly tomorrow, after all.

I wasn't a smoker, but seeing him resting there, exhaling cheerfully, I felt a bit of the appeal.

"He's slacking off. That's just like Zoltan," Rit remarked, nodding to herself.

Considering that I lived with Rit, and we planned to have children someday, I didn't think smoking was a great habit to pick up.

"I'm happy enough having you here with me."

"Wh-where did that come from all of a sudden?" Rit blushed. "You have a habit of saying strange things out of nowhere... But I'm happy to have you with me, too."

Rit concealed her happy grin behind her bandana.

Zoltan was peaceful and happy.

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The next day, I went to Ruti's plantation carrying a jar filled with fairy apple jam.

"Big Bro Red!"

"Hey, Tanta."

The half-elf boy had a large bag hanging from his shoulder as he waved at me.

Carpentry tools?

"Morning, Big Bro!"

"Good morning. Are you headed over to Gonz's place?"

Tanta flashed a toothy grin.

"That's right! Starting today, I'm going to be working at his place every day!"

"I suppose it's about time for that. Congratulations, Tanta."

"Heh, thanks!"

Last spring, Tanta had been on the verge of losing his eyesight to white-eye. After being kicked out of the Hero's party and settling down here in Zoltan, I pushed myself to the limit for the first time in a long while to cure him.

I remembered sprinting along mountain paths using Lightning Speed in the dead of night while the fire caused by Albert's battle with the owlbear raged. Tanta had needed medicine made of blood needles, and I gathered as many as I could.

It was actually a pretty close-run incident. If Tanta had contracted white-eye even a day later, or if Gonz had gone to someone else for the ingredients, all of the blood needles would have been destroyed in the fire, and Tanta would have been left blind.

“See you, Big Bro! Don’t forget your duties at the shop!”

“Hah! How strict. But I’ve already decided to take things easy in life.”

“You’re a natural Zoltani!”

Tanta waved and then dashed off.

“So, Tanta’s old enough to start working, huh?”

Take your eyes off them for a minute and children grew up quickly.

Tanta had gotten a bit taller. Traces of the handsome half-elf man he would become showed on his face.

He ran jauntily with the bag of tools over his shoulder.

Knowing that I could see Tanta like this because I was able to help him last year filled me with pride.

I was truly grateful I’d been there to get him what he needed.

By reflecting on that event, I realized that it had led to me getting the shop of my dreams. That day had marked the start of my new, easy life.

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We were at Ruti’s farm.

“It looks delicious.”

“Is that apple jam? I can’t wait to try some.”

Ruti and Tisse were eyeing the jar I’d brought.

“I’m glad you’re both excited for it.”

“Your food is always delicious, Big Brother, so of course I’m happy to get some as a gift... We can have a jam party today.”

The girls appeared pleased, although it only barely showed on their faces.

The former Hero and a fearsome assassin—regardless of power, they were still girls eager for a tasty snack.

Peering out at the plantation, I said, “You’ve got a lot of herbs growing here now.”

“Mhm, we worked hard just like you taught us.”

“We’ll have to try getting you some customers lined up soon.”

“Customers...”

Ruti was growing a wide variety of seasonal medicinal plants on her farm. In a few days, it would be time to harvest.

“Naturally, my store will be first in line. Once you have your herbs gathered, I’ll be glad to buy some of your stock.”

“Mhm...”

Ruti smiled, yet I noticed there was something different in her expression. Perhaps it was a sense of achievement. She was pleased to earn her way via a job she'd chosen herself, rather than as the Hero.



In other words, she was living her life as Ruti, the individual.

“You get in contact with the Merchants Guild, the clinics in Zoltan, and the traveling vendors going around the villages,” I advised.

“Mhm... Will you come with me?”

“Sure, I’m a member of the Merchants Guild, after all. Plus, I’m your mentor when it comes to living a slow life in Zoltan.”

“Mentor Big Brother.”

Ruti seemed to enjoy saying the title.

“‘Mentor Big Brother’...that has a ring to it.”

It must have struck a chord with Ruti, because she kept muttering it to herself.

“Oh, right.” Suddenly, Ruti’s expression grew serious. She spun around to face Tisse.

“U-umm, yes, Ms. Ruti?”

“Tisse.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. Things only went so well because you’ve been here to help.”

The assassin looked surprised for a moment but quickly smiled.

“Of course. Running the plantation together has been great.”

“Mhm. It’s fun.”

Ruti and Tisse spent their days tilling soil instead of brandishing swords.

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I decided to stop by one other place: the hospital in the center of town.

“Him? I imagine he’s exercising in the park.”

After thanking the nurse at the reception desk, I left.

The park in the center of Zoltan was well maintained, setting it apart from the wild forest in the lower part of town.

Anyone who took an adequately maintained park for granted didn’t know Zoltan. Slacking off wherever you could was the local pastime. This park only stayed in such pristine condition because the one who oversaw it had developed a passion for the job.

Children were playing tag, and there were no large stones on the ground that they might trip and hurt themselves on.

Zoltan was held together thanks to those few passionate individuals who stuck to their work.

“There he is.”

Danan the Martial Artist was near some shrubbery that was not

especially popular, practicing techniques with calm, slow movements and a quiet expression that belied his usual stentorian nature.

“Looks like you’re in pretty good form.”

“Yeah.”

Danan’s movements rapidly accelerated.

He planted a foot with an audible thud as he thrust his left fist forward.

Even though I knew it wouldn’t strike me, I still felt a chill run down my spine.

“About eighty percent, maybe? Well, the rest will come back with fighting.”

“Are you seriously telling me that’s not your full strength?”

What a crazy pugilist.

“Danan, I made some fairy apple jam. Want some to go with the hospital food?”

“Ohhh, that’d be great. The food you make is always the best. It’s a shame I’ll have to give it up soon.”

“Yeah, I guess you won’t be in Zoltan much longer.”

The heavy wounds Danan had suffered during the fight with the Asura demon Shisandan had nearly healed. Once he was fighting fit, there was no reason for him to linger in the middle of nowhere.

“It’ll be lonely without you,” I said.

“Then come with me. We can have fun murderin’ the demon lord’s armies.”

The fact that he could state something like that so breezily was proof that this man wasn’t the sort who understood the idea of a slow life. While I chuckled wryly, I didn’t think his way of living was any less wonderful than mine.

“I’ve decided to remain an apothecary here with Rit.”

“That’s a shame.”

Danan didn’t comprehend the path we’d chosen, but he was the sort who acknowledged different values, even if he couldn’t understand them.

“Then after I kill the demon lord, I’ll swing by again. Drinks are on you when I do.”

“Yeah, I’ll get you the best booze in Zoltan.”

“Ga-ha-ha... Hmm...”

The burly man’s expression turned unusually severe.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, if there’s some incredible liquor in Zoltan, then I wanna try it before I leave. Otherwise, I’ll be wondering about it forever.”

“Ahh. In that case, why don’t we get a drink to celebrate when you’re discharged from the hospital.”

“Now *that’s* an idea! I haven’t had a drop since I was admitted, so

I could really go for some alcohol!”

“...I’m not nearly as rich as I used to be, so keep it to normal booze for the second half of the night.”

“Ga-ha-ha! C’mon, man, live a little!” Danan slapped my back as he laughed.

That hurts. Don’t you know how to hold back?

“Also...,” Danan began.

“Is there something else?”

“Yeah, there’s one thing I have to do before we go our separate ways.”

“What?”

Danan looked me straight in the eyes. “Gideon, I want you to spar with me one final time.”

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“And you accepted?!”

“Yeah.”

Rit’s eyes were wide in shock.

I couldn’t help but think how cute she looked when she was surprised. To thank her for watching the shop while I was out, I poured her some tea and set it on the table.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Although not as potent as a medicine crafted using a skill, the brew was made with herbs that helped relax the mind.

Rit exhaled and her shoulders eased up. “Your tea is always tasty.”

“Because it’s filled with love.” Despite saying the words myself, I felt embarrassed.

Maybe I should have phrased it a little differently.

“Still though, you and Danan sparring...”

“He insisted we face off one last time before he leaves. It’s the least I can do... He’s a friend.”

“As long as you aren’t forcing yourself, I guess it’s fine... But do you even stand a chance?”

Danan the Martial Artist.

He was the obvious choice for second strongest in the Hero’s party.

The man overwhelmed Shisandan alone, and were it not for Ares’s interference, he would’ve won.

Theodora, Ares, Tisse, or I couldn’t have done the same.

The Asura demon we fought in the ruins was just that strong.

“If we’re talking winning and losing, there’s no way I’ll come out on top.”

“Ugh, yeah...”

“However, sparring with Danan isn’t a fight to the death or a competition match. He’s not after a victory.”

“What does he want, then?”

In this world controlled by Divine Blessings, death matches were an everyday affair.

Excluding young children whose blessings were yet to awaken, there were few people who’d never killed.

The carpenter Gonz, the furniture craftsman Stormthunder, Dr. Newman, Oparara at the *oden* stall... All the people living quiet lives had killed monsters to raise their levels. And that was all the more reason I believed there was something important to be gained from sparring. If you didn’t kill, your level wouldn’t increase. A fight like that had no effect on your blessing. There were many warriors who believed that if you had time for a meaningless bout, you were better off leveling up hunting monsters.

“Fighting techniques don’t exist solely for Divine Blessings,” I said.

“I understand that much. Master used to say there was a philosophy to the sword.”

Gaius, the captain of Loggervia’s royal guard, had been Rit’s master. He’d been entrusted with both the leadership of Loggervia’s elite warriors and Rit’s education and training. Undoubtedly, he’d been a preeminent swordsman.

“I would have liked to spar with him once.”

“Hmph... Then why not go a round with me?”

Rit leaned over, bringing her face in to mine. My heart skipped a beat to have her beautiful sky-blue eyes right in front of me.

“W-with you?”

“I don’t think we’ve ever dueled before.”

“That’s true.”

“You’ve sparred with everyone else in the party, right?”

“Ares only used magic, and Tisse joined after I left, so I never had matches with them...but I did fight everyone else.”

“Then spar with me, too!”

“But...”

I groaned a bit.

Typically, mock fights were conducted using the spell Merciful, either directly or in potion form. The magic was for catching another living creature without hurting it. By applying it to weapons and yourself, it was possible to keep from injuring another person. This made it possible to fight against a friend at full strength using real weapons.

While Merciful kept attacks from injuring your opponent, the blows still inflicted pain. An otherwise lethal blow wouldn’t kill you,

but you'd still pass out from the agony.

It could get so intense that those with weak constitutions perished from shock.

Merciful stopped physical wounds, but was I truly prepared to hurt Rit?

"No, there's no way."

"Whaaaaat?"

Rit pouted and tried to argue, but I refused to budge.

"I can't raise my sword if it means hurting you."

"Hmm... When you put it that way, I guess I'd have a pretty tough time doing the same to you. I'd likely end up hesitating."

"Back when you were Rit the hero and I was still a knight, we probably could have gone at each other full force."

"But it's hopeless for us now."

We smiled awkwardly at each other.

Rit and I lived in Zoltan not as warriors but as peaceful lovers. The sort you might find anywhere in the world.

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If I truly meant to spar with that manifestation of martial arts, I couldn't afford to rest on my laurels.

I stood in the yard, holding my bronze sword.

Imagining Danan's figure before me, I sharpened my senses, loosening several techniques.

"Hahhhhhh!"

I accelerated while shouting.

I gritted my teeth as I reached the limit of my speed, pushing myself to go faster and strike before my mind could process the motion.

"...Kh!"

My blade came down clean and quick.

Sweat shone on my body, a response to the heat that had built within me.

"I've gotten rusty..."

Living so far removed from battle had led me to neglect daily training. Naturally, my abilities had suffered for it.

"At this rate, I'll end up disappointing Danan."

I didn't like the idea of that.

I took a mouthful of water from a bottle, swallowing slowly.

"There aren't many days left... I have to practice."

I raised my sword again and began another technique.



The next day, morning.

“Good morning, Red!”

The door to the shop opened, and a bright, beautiful voice rang out.

“Good morning, Yarandrala.”

The high elf entered and immediately approached me.

“Wh-what is it?”

“I heard from the forest trees! You’re going to fight Danan?!”

“There’s no hiding anything from you.”

Yarandrala had the power to control plants.

To keep something a secret from her, you had to make sure there was no flora nearby.

The bout with Danan wasn’t classified or anything, though.

“In that case, you’re going to need my help.”

“Huh?”

Yarandrala grabbed my shoulder, her eyes gleaming. “If you want to regain your combat instincts for your fight, then some special training with me is the best way!”

“Oh... It is?”

“Of course!”

Rit gently pulled Yarandrala away from me. “Your blessing is Singer of the Trees, though. You know more about spirit magic than melee battle. How will that help?”

Yarandrala grinned broadly at Rit’s question.

“Heh-heh, despite appearances, I happen to be the founder of a certain style of martial arts.”

“A style of martial arts? No way. Sure, you’ve lived a long time, but...”

Rit’s confusion was understandable. Yarandrala’s usual demeanor made it difficult to believe she’d created one of the continent’s major fighting styles.

“It’s true. Yarandrala is the creator of the Lotus School of staff techniques.”

“Whaaaat?! I’ve heard of that one!”

Rit gawked at Yarandrala, stunned. She’d never guessed that a martial artist hid behind that friendly elf’s smile. Rit looked like she expected one of us to tell her this was a joke.

But it was true.

The Lotus School’s style had been made public. It was widely practiced around the continent by adventurers and village militias. If you included the offshoot branches, it was a contestant for most popular martial arts school on Avalon.

Because it required only a single wooden staff, the practice was comparatively easy to learn, and any knowledge gained transferred well to spears and two-handed swords, making the discipline a foundation for military training.

It was an equitable martial art that allowed anyone to get stronger, something that existed in stark contrast to Danan's style, which mirrored his own desire to surpass all others and become the strongest in the world.

Such was the form that Yarandralla had created.

"Huh, that's surprising." Sitting in her chair, Rit looked genuinely stunned. "I didn't know you were so famous, Yarandralla."

"Leading a navy, establishing a band of mercenaries, writing a book on medicinal herbs... Yarandralla's really done a lot."

The elf puffed her chest out in pride.

"I simply did all the things I wanted to, and I happen to have a bit of a perfectionist streak."

"Calling it a perfectionist streak after having achieved a half-dozen things that will go down in history is the kind of humility that makes others feel bad."

"Hah-hah... So, getting back to the topic at hand, let's do some crash-course practice to get you back in shape for sparring with Danan!"

As expected of someone who created a whole school of martial arts as a hobby, Yarandralla loved special training sessions.

"Special training, huh? I suppose coaching from a powerful opponent is the best way to get my fighting instincts back. There's probably no one better suited than you," I said.

The duel with Danan would likely be nothing more than sword and fist—no magic or ranged combat.

"Mrgh. I'm training with you, too!" Rit declared, pouting. "I can't fight you, but I can give you advice and wipe your sweat and all sorts of other things!"

"It'll be reassuring to have you with me. Even rough training will be fun with you at my side."

"That's right! Okay, it's decided! Eh-heh-heh."

Rit's joyful grin had me feeling happy, too.

"Mhm, I had a feeling you'd say that." Yarandralla nodded as though satisfied. "I think it best if we make this a training camp excursion in the woods outside of Zoltan."

"A trip, huh? That brings back memories of field drills when I was with the knights."

"What you need right now is to hone your mind. Reforging techniques that have dulled from a peaceful life won't happen in a day, but your spirit carries a different sort of strength now than when

you were Gideon.”

“Right. There are lots of things I’ve gained since becoming Red. Oh, Gajasura said something like that, too.”

The Asura demon I’d fought during Queen Leonor’s attack had lived in tranquility as a human prince, yet he’d still grown stronger.

“Returning to how I was as Gideon still wouldn’t be enough to best Danan. So why not train with the goal of showing him my strength as Red?” I suggested.

“That’s the idea! You’ve got to aim higher than before!”

In this world, strength was determined by blessings that only grew when you slew opponents. Out of all the foes I’d encountered during my journey, Danan was the most beloved by his blessing, and he loved it in return.

Overwhelming enemies with superior blessings despite bearing the unremarkable Divine Blessing of the Martial Artist was proof of how suited Danan was to the route Demis had set for him.

The man was the epitome of his kind.

As for me, my Divine Blessing was Guide. The blessing carried no redeeming features save for being strong early in life. Without any inherent skills, it didn’t matter if I fit the blessing’s role or not.

However, my time as a guide still had value. Rit had assured me of that.

Gajasura’s words and Rit’s: an enemy and the woman I loved more than anything.

Both had acknowledged my strength as a person, not the might of my blessing.

“Thinking back on it, I’ve gone through a lot since arriving in Zoltan.”

I still couldn’t picture myself triumphing over Danan. However, I wanted the strongest Martial Artist in the world to know Red of Zoltan’s power.

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Two days later, morning.

I woke up early and hung a sign on the door.

“We will be taking a three-day break.’ That’ll do.”

“I’m ready over here, too.”

Rit had finished packing the tent and the rest of the things into her item box.

“It’s nice being able to take a few days off from the store without any hassle.”

“Yeah, everyone already uses the excuse that the weather’s too nice to work during the spring anyhow.”

“In any other town, we’d probably get complaints, but in Zoltan, people will laugh it off as a matter of course. ‘Nothing to do about it if they don’t feel like working.’ I was shocked by it initially, but it’s really grown on me.”

After Rit and I shared a laugh, we headed to the meetup point to link up with Yarandralla.

“Red!”

The elf was already waiting for us in the plaza.

“I thought we were early, but I guess you beat us here,” I greeted.

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting since last night.”

“Huh?”

Yarandralla didn’t sound like she was joking.

Maybe one night of waiting just doesn’t feel like that much to a high elf?

“I was really looking forward to this, after all.”

Yarandralla flashed a cheerful smile. Not long after, two more people arrived.

“Big Brother.”

“Good morning, Red, Rit, Yarandralla.”

“Morning Ruti, Tisse.”

Ruti and Tisse were both dressed for outdoor activity.

Ruti hurried to my side.

“Were you waiting long?” she asked.

“No, we just got here.”

“Nnh.” Ruti nodded as though she was pleased to learn that.

Evidently, she’d planned to get here right after Rit and me because she wanted to ask if we’d been waiting for a while.

Did she read that in a story or something?

For her to be able to predict my movements down to the second...

It’s adorable how much she loves her big brother!

Tisse watched me with a bit of an odd expression, but there was no denying the fact that Ruti was adorable, so I didn’t see any issues.

“I’m looking forward to practicing with you.”

Ruti and Tisse were joining us for the special training camp.

When Ruti learned that we’d be gone for three days, she refused to be left out.

“Wanting to do combat training with Ms. Ruti... You are quite brave, Red.”

Tisse was impressed.

Ruti was humanity’s strongest. Even if she fought with only a sword and didn’t use magic or any skills from her New Truth blessing, she would undoubtedly win.

“I was the one who taught her how to use a blade. A master has to be able to train with his student, right?” I replied.

“Right. Big Brother is my master. I’m strong because of him.”

Ruti was prouder of that than I was.

“It’s true that your style and Ms. Ruti’s share some similarities, but the theories behind them differ significantly.”

“Well, Ruti’s a genius, after all. She took the Bahamut Knight techniques I taught her and made them her own.”

I still clearly recalled instructing her on how to wield a sword.

Despite never having held a weapon before, Ruti absorbed everything I taught her like a sponge.

As an officer in the Bahamut Knights, I’d instructed plenty of recruits, but no student took to the art as well as my little sister.

Teaching her something once was enough for her to grasp the fundamentals. After a second time, she could apply the knowledge to real-world situations. And by a third lesson, she could point out her instructors’ shortcomings.

Our battle with the demon lord’s army had already begun when I started giving her lessons. When Ares joined us and we left the capital, Ruti was a master who could have opened her own dojo and no one would have batted an eye.

“I remember every word and every moment with you. So all the things you taught me are very easy to understand.”

Ruti looked proud of that.

So cute.

Tisse pursed her lips.

“Ah, looks like the last person’s finally here,” Rit observed, pointing.

Turning around, I saw a big man who, even at a distance, was clearly well-built. His right sleeve fluttered in the breeze.

“Heya.”

Danan grinned.

“To think the guy you’re supposed to spar with is going to be joining us for practice...” Rit sounded amused.

We’d decided to hold our bout in the woods on the final day of the training camp.

Perhaps it was odd to invite Danan along, but the goal wasn’t to win by outwitting him. There was no purpose to keeping things secret.

“Morning, Danan. Congrats on getting out of the hospital.”

“Thanks. And I appreciate the invite. A little exercise will do me some good after getting rusty in that hospital bed.” Danan flashed a toothy grin. He looked positively overjoyed.

Yarandrala was a fan of intensive special training sessions, but there was no one who liked the idea of them more than Danan.

To that living embodiment of martial arts, they were not just a path to greater strength but also the ultimate pastime.

Danan was the sort of crazy guy who'd go on an intensive regimen to refresh himself even when he was exhausted.

"All right, everyone's here, so let's go."

Yarandrala grinned as she addressed us all.

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We walked along the road with Zoltan's gate at our backs.

The green fields were filled with a myriad of colorful flowers blooming under the spring sun.

They didn't bloom as large as flowers selectively bred for display, but they were beautiful and filled with vitality. The morning dew clinging to petals shone gold.

"You found a spot for us to train, right, Yarandrala?"

Walking at the head of our group, Yarandrala bobbed her head in reply to Rit's question.

"I did. There's a nice, comfortable place in the forest just a short trek away. It's next to a brook, and the trees are sparser there. It's perfect for moving around and exercising."

"I wonder if it would be good for a picnic lunch."

"Of course! It's perfect for that!"

Because the objective was to get in some serious training, I wanted a place where we could avoid drawing attention. Seeing former members of the Hero's party going all out would be too much for the average person.

"Don't worry, it's plenty far from any village. The Queen of the Forest resides there, and anyone who knows about her will keep away."

"Queen of the Forest?"

"Meeting her will be fun. We should greet her once we're set up."

Yarandrala sounded like she was having fun keeping a secret from us.

The Queen of the Forest?

Were she a ferocious monster, there probably would've been an Adventurers Guild quest to dispatch her. I hadn't heard anything like that, however.

Which would mean that she was someone who was not going to cause harm to people.

Will this be like the undine we met before?

"She can be a little bit moody, but she's a good girl at heart. It's just a little bit of fun."

"Guess I'll look forward to it, then," I said.

A little bit of excitement to go with my slow life.

This was our first trip in a while, and I was certain it'd be a great

time.

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We set up our tents alongside the stream babbling through the woods.

Rit was humming as she worked with the tent poles. “Hm-hmmm ♪”

She’s in a good mood.

“All right, done over here.”

“I’m good, too.”

We both beheld the ten-person tent we’d erected with a sense of accomplishment.

“Was there any reason we needed one this big?”

“Tisse, Danan, are you done gathering firewood?”

“Have a look for yourself.”

Tisse was carrying a backpack filled with timber, and Danan was hoisting a three-meter-tall tower of wood with a single finger. His pile wasn’t even tied down with rope...

“It’s good training for balance and controlling your strength. And if you drop the pile, you can pick it up and reassemble the logs to get your blood pumping.”

“How very Danan-esque.”

“Got that right.”

Perhaps he was a bit drunk on all this activity after spending so much time incapacitated. His quirks were a bit more intense than usual.

“Big Brother.”

“Ah, Ru...ti...”

My little sister was balancing towers of wood on every one of her fingers—ten times what Danan was carrying.

“Look, I can do it, too.”

I couldn’t begin to understand the physics at play keeping the logs from collapsing.

“You’re amazing, Ruti.”

“Heh-heh.”

Ruti giggled, managing to keep her ten stacks impossibly stable.

“That’s the Hero for you. Oh, I guess you’re not the Hero anymore, though, huh? Well, that’s Ruti for you.”

Danan grinned, clearly impressed.

“Okay, I’m gonna go fetch some more firewood!”

“Wait! We’ve got more than enough already!”

I hurried to stop Danan before he could race off again.



“All right. The tent is set up. Seems about time for lunch.”

Our shelter was ready; a small fire burned strong enough not to die out too quickly, and a pot was set over the flame.

There was a brook only steps away, so water wouldn't be an issue.

We had enough food for about three days: meat, vegetables, eggs, and the like.

I intended to supplement that by catching some fish and frying them for one of our meals.

That could wait until tomorrow, though.

“Okay, our first training camp meal will be a picnic.”

““Hooray!”” Rit and Ruti both cheered.

“Your cooking, huh? There's enough for me, right?” Danan asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

“Perfect!”

I laid out a cloth on the ground and set out the boxes on top of it.

“Today's menu is bread, sausages, a raisin-and-carrot salad, grilled shrimp, sautéed duck, and chocolate cake for dessert.”

“Talk about luxurious! Why didn't you make anything like this when we were on the road in the old days?” Danan questioned.

“That would've been impossible. I can only manage all this because we're eating it the same day I made it.”

Plus, I'd gotten much better at cooking since then.

During our days traveling as the Hero's party, I labored to prepare food that tasted good while constantly suffering from a lack of ingredients and prep time.

Now I could indulge a bit and give a meal more than the bare necessities. Ultimately, the goal was always to make things that Rit and Ruti would enjoy. The frontier didn't have much in the way of goods for trade, but between the rivers, ocean, and mountains, Zoltan had an abundance of food to choose from.

If people learned how to make ships like the Vendidad that can safely cross the more dangerous parts of the sea, would Zoltan have a boom in trade?

Regardless, an advent like that was still in the distant future, so there wasn't much use in considering it too much.

“This salad is great!”

“What is this paste below the shrimp? It has a wonderful flavor.”

“Your cooking is always delicious, Big Brother, but this meal is really, really good.”

“You used coconut oil for the bread, right? It's a neat taste; different from usual.”

Rit, Tisse, Ruti, and Yarandrala all enjoyed the fruits of my labor.

And seeing their pleased reactions made me happy.

"It's been a long time since the Hero's party was assembled like this." Danan seemed a bit moved as he chowed down on a sausage.

"Ares and Theodora aren't here, though."

"Well, Ares is dead... Oh, that reminds me. Did you see the newspaper?"

"Yeah."

A mysterious mercenary named Escarlata had defeated Altra, the demon lord's heavenly king of the water, in single combat. Altra had survived but was grievously wounded. The demon forces had no choice but to retreat.

"That's gotta be Theodora," Danan said.

"You think so, too?"

News was slow to reach Zoltan.

The battle had happened two months ago, during the winter, yet it had only been printed in a Zoltani paper two days ago.

The masked knight Escarlata, a mysterious female warrior who used a spear and clerical magic.

"I can't imagine anyone else on the continent capable of beating one of the heavenly kings. Any spear user that proficient would've made a name for themselves long before now."

"I would've followed any rumors of a person like that to see if we could invite them to join our party."

"Having a member who could beat a heavenly king definitely would've made things easier."

"Yeah, we always set our sights on battles no one managed to win."

"The first one against Desmond was really, really rough. How many times did we have to run away and regroup before we finally sent him packing?"

"Three. It was on our fourth attempt when we froze all the earth around him that we finally beat him."

"Retaking a country occupied by the demon lord's army, defeating one of the heavenly kings, finding a legendary holy sword—we were the first bunch to do it all."

Our journey had been filled with previously impossible feats.

Winning against an invincible enemy, exploring untouched ruins, finding treasures thought lost forever...

"It's going to change going forward, I'm sure, but right now, Theodora and I are the only ones who can stand up to one of the heavenly kings one-on-one. Excluding Ruti, of course."

"I saw heroes from every country back when I was with the knights, but you and Theodora are way beyond the rest now. By the way, Escarlata has a follower, a swordsman with a prosthetic right

hand. It has to be Albert.”

“Him, huh? I never did get to thank him properly.”

“For saving you when you were dying after the fight with Ares and Shisandan?”

“He was way outta his league, yet he stood his ground. His strength ain’t much, but he’s got some serious willpower.”

It’s already been more than half a year since I fought Albert in Zoltan.

He’d made a deal with the contract demon that had taken over Bighawk. However, he’d since reformed after meeting Theodora.

“It’s not just that.”

“Huh?”

Danan shook his head.

“I don’t know what sorta man he was in the past, but from what I heard, he changed before Theodora got to him. Losing to you was what started it.”

“...I see.”

“Victory becomes the strength to keep going forward; defeat becomes the strength to find a new path.”

“It’s weird to hear that sort of expression from you.”

“I used to be a dojo master, after all. I know what to say to teach people.”

Danan laughed heartily and then stuffed some of the sautéed duck into his mouth.

“This really is great!”

“Glad you like it.”

I took a bit of the salad. It had a nice sour bite to it that really hit the spot.

“Once I leave Zoltan, the first thing I’m going to do is go after Theodora.” Danan clenched his fist. “I haven’t thought about much beyond that. There’s not much I know besides beating the enemy in front of me. If she’s planning to go finish off the heavenly king of the water, I’ll gladly join in.”

“As strong as you are, I’m sure you’ll be able to make an impact anywhere you go.”

Such was the fate of humanity’s strongest Martial Artist.

Actually, since Ruti’s chosen to live as a normal girl, Danan is probably humanity’s strongest warrior, period.

Staying behind and living my slow life in Zoltan meant never knowing what battlefield Danan might find himself on, but no matter where he traveled, he’d be the mightiest person in the fight.

The sight of one with such a common blessing would undoubtedly have a significant impact. It would inspire hope and courage in many.

“Oy! Danan! Are you going to eat all the duck before I get to have any?!”

“What? Early bird catches the worm!”

Yarandrala and Danan were getting into a jousting match with their forks over the last piece of duck. However, before their duel could be decided, a fork flashed like a lightning bolt and stole away the final bite.

“Delicious.”

““Ruti!!!””

Yarandrala and Danan looked stunned for a moment, then looked at each other and laughed.

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After we finished our fun little meal and washed the lunch boxes, Yarandrala led us into the woods.

“The Queen of the Forest is here. As long as we give a proper greeting, we can avoid any pointless quarrels. Paying adequate respect is important in all things.”

“The Queen of the Forest, huh?”

As we walked through the woods, I felt something was off.

“Hey, Red, there aren’t many large animals or monsters nearby.”

“You noticed too, Rit?”

“Yeah. There’re definitely a few, but...”

She was right; there were plenty of smaller animals like mice, but there were hardly any wolves or monsters to be found.

Yarandrala forged a path to guide us, and I noted along the way that there weren’t any animal trails.

No beasts large enough to cut any such route through the forest lived here.

“And there are lots of plants.”

“They’re a bit different from Zoltan’s other forests, too.”

The climate here was no different from any other place in the region. Which meant...

“Does the Queen of the Forest possess some power that’s affecting these woods?”

“Heh-heh, you’ll see soon enough.”

Yarandrala seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Can you feel anything, Mister Crawly Wawly?” Tisse whispered.

The spider on her shoulder looked all around, hopping.

“Oh? So it’s nothing too serious?”

“If he says so, then we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Mister Crawly Wawly was a reliable spider.

“We’re almost there. She won’t do anything unless provoked, so no one attack.”

“Got it.”

Yarandrala broke through the undergrowth first, and the rest of us followed after.

And when we did...

Bzzzzzzzzzz.

...the noise of countless beating wings filled the air. Dozens of honey bees as large as medium-sized dogs were flying all around.

“Giant bees!”

These creatures were large-scale insect monsters closely related to normal bees.

Large-scale insect monsters varied in mass depending on the species. For example, there were some giant spiders as little as small dogs and others as massive as elephants.

Famous examples like the drake-eater mantises, titan centipedes, and destroyer beetles, despite possessing mere Warrior blessings were recorded as fearsome threats no different from dragons or giants. And it was all because of their size. They were among the most powerful monsters on the continent.

“Remember, don’t attack,” Yarandrala gently reminded.

Each of us was a hardened combat veteran. We weren’t going to panic over the sound of some giant bees buzzing around.

“There’s a kind of spring feeling to this.”

“They’re cute and fluffy.”

Tisse and Ruti seemed to be enjoying themselves, watching the giant bees go about their tasks.

“I wonder if they would share some honey?”

Rit was seemingly wondering about getting her hands on something sweet. Considering how large the bees were, perhaps they’d be able to share a jar’s worth of honey.

With a skill or magic to communicate with insects, we could strike a deal.

“Do you have any spirit magic for talking with insects, Rit?”

She shook her head.

“No, I can only use spirit magic connected to the four elements.”

“It’s okay, I can do it. I’ll ask if they’re willing to part with a bit.”

“Hooray.”

Rit smiled cheerfully at Yarandrala’s answer.

After another ten minutes of walking, we came to an immense hive.

“The Queen of the Forest is in here.”

“So we’re to meet the queen bee, then.”

“It’s my first time entering a beehive.”

“Mine too.”

Between my time as a knight and Rit’s time as the hero of Loggervia, we had gone on all sorts of adventures, but neither of us

had seen a beehive large enough for a human to walk around in.

We climbed up the characteristic hexagonal spaces.

“Living in a house like this would be fantastic exercise.”

I shook my head and laughed wryly at Danan’s comment. “Don’t get any ideas.”

This was a nest for creatures that could fly. There were no stairs or ladders, so we had to leap from one chamber to the next to reach the queen.

Anyone other than us would have found it an irksome challenge.

Yarandralla, still leading the way, jumped into a room clearly larger than the rest, and we all followed.

“Have we reached our destination?” I muttered.

The Queen of the Forest was far larger than I’d imagined.

“She’s...really big.”

A queen bee typically dwarfed her drones but didn’t look too different. However, the Queen of the Forest sported a body nearly four meters long.

Her brown-striped stomach lay on the ground, and she was covered in an armor-like shell, peering down at us with round, black eyes.

Giant bees fed on flower nectar, which wasn’t enough to grow truly massive, but evidently, a queen could still become considerably sizeable.

“She’s exceptionally large. For as long as I’ve lived, I’ve never seen a queen giant bee that’s matched her.” Yarandralla approached the great insect. “Good afternoon, Your Highness.”

There was a rustling sound from the shell, and the queen bee’s face drew near to Yarandralla’s.

I heard Rit gasp.

I’m sure it will be fine.

I relaxed and observed the queen bee from close up.

This wasn’t the sort of creature you’d find anywhere else, even in Central’s zoo. Witnessing a rarity was part of what made a trip enjoyable.

“Yes, I breathed some life into the plants of the forest. We are staying beside a small brook and harbor no intention of harming any of you.”

A green vine extended from Yarandralla’s hand to touch the queen bee’s feelers. Apparently, that was how she was communicating with the insect.

Mister Crawly Wawly cocked his head and felt himself with a foreleg.

Is he trying to imagine what her feelers are?

Tisse looked amused by Mister Crawly Wawly’s confusion.

“Also, could you please share just a little bit of your honey with us?” Yarandrala sang, her voice at a whisper.

“This is great,” Danan said. “Traveling with you guys always means something new. All sorts of adventures no one’s ever had before.”

“Yeah.”

“...I always had fun.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t all bad... I enjoyed it, too.”

“Heh-heh,” Danan laughed after hearing our replies.

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Our meeting with the Queen of the Forest concluded, we returned to camp.

“All right, finally time for some training.”

Danan was rotating his arm, raring to go.

“Shall we start with some practice swings?”

Everyone nodded at my suggestion.

“Okay, how about three sets of ten thousand for a warm-up?”

“Sure, let’s start with that.”

We all spread out to give one another room and readied our weapons.

“Everyone should keep to their own pace, but let’s start together for the first swing.”

We all assumed our stances.

“Right, then... One!”

I brought my sword down as I shouted, and I heard the air whistle from the others’ movements.

I felt my spirit sharpening, and my grip on my sword’s hilt tightened. This was the first time I’d trained with so many heroes in a very long time.

There was a charm to Rit’s blade. Every little move was beautiful, possessed of a flowing rhythm that connected all of her attacks. It exuded a heroic quality that was strong and captivating.

Ruti’s sword moved perfectly, precise and mighty, with no flaws to criticize. None could stand against it.

Tisse’s sword was prodigious. The motions were only practice swings, yet she wove in countless feints and head fakes. Each time, her blade ended where a vital point would be on a person.

Yarandrala’s staff surpassed all limits. It moved with a technique that had been built over decades of practice.

And Danan’s fist was martial arts embodied, containing every aspect of the discipline. There was also a faith in himself to overcome all obstacles in his way with nothing but his prowess.

Danan believed that if he raised his discipline to greater heights, he could win the war against the demon lord's army. Such a notion was laughable ordinarily, but he trusted his power absolutely. That was why Danan was humanity's greatest pugilist.

Around an hour later, we'd completed the three sets of ten thousand reps. We were all sitting to drink some water.

"You really are amazing, Gideon," Danan suddenly praised. "No one else is here, so it's okay if I call you by your old name, right?"

"I guess that's fine..."

"I can see your enemy in your sword."

"Enemy?"

"Yeah, by watching your practice swings, I'm able to envision the sort of opponent you're striking."

"Well, I do picture certain foes when I swing."

"Human, elf, monster, demon. The sort of armor, the size... Even though it's always a slash from the same middle stance, I can clearly recognize a different enemy each time. That's how solid your knowledge is."

Getting complimented by the greatest fighter in the world wasn't a bad feeling at all.

"I see. Thanks."

"I can't wait to spar with you."

It was clear from Danan's expression how sincerely he was looking forward to our bout.

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The training continued after that, until it started to grow dark. Dinner was bacon soup and bread with some honey.

After eating, I went off alone to wash off the sweat and dirt and then sat down to observe the nighttime forest scenery.

When we traveled as the Hero's party, camping was our life, and the dark woods had become a familiar backdrop. However, I hadn't seen anything like this since my easy life with Rit began.

The giant bees had driven off all the larger herbivorous animals, and with no prey around, the larger carnivorous animals left soon after, so the forest was quite peaceful after dusk.

Surrounded only by birds and other small creatures, I thought about the duel with Danan that awaited at the end of the training camp.

"Red."

"Rit? What is it?"

Looking over a shoulder, I saw her standing there.

“You were taking a while, so I wondered if something happened.”

“I thought I’d take in the scenery after I finished bathing.”

“Um... Do you mind if I sit next to you?”

“Help yourself.”

“Yay.”

Rit dropped down next to me. “This really is a nice place. Leave it to Yarandrala to find the loveliest spot in the woods.”

“Yeah, it’s perfect for training. No monsters or other people to disrupt things. In the Bahamut Knights, we covered the basics in a busy training ground, but we did all the higher-level practice in a place far from any towns or villages.”

“Oh? In Loggervia there’re lots of stories about warriors going off to train in the mountains alone. I guess that idea’s pretty universal.”

“Seems that way.”

We sat together, watching the woods. Glowing insects danced above the water, shedding faint light.

“Say, Red, why don’t I give you a massage?”

“Huh? Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“This is the first time you’ve really exerted yourself in a long while, right? You don’t want muscle aches holding you back when you spar with Danan, do you?”

“Mm... I guess not. Then could I ask you to help me out?”

“Of course!”

Rit had a towel to lay on the ground for me, so I could lie down without getting dirty again.

“Pardon me.” Rit gently straddled my body. “Here I go.”

Her fingers touched my back. I twitched just a little bit, prompting a giggle from her.

“All right... Hmmm...”

Rit muttered a bit to herself as she placed a palm against my back.

“This sort of feels like a real massage.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Actually, I studied a bit before we left. I wanted to help you out some.”

All that time as an adventurer had given Rit better knowledge of the human body than most, so it must have been easy to learn about massaging. And since she dual-wielded swords, her finger control with both hands was top class.

“Around here...?” Rit began to rub my body gently. “And the goal is to help improve blood flow, so I shouldn’t put too much strength into it.”

“Nnn...”

“How’s that?”

“It feels really good.”

Her massage was nice and comfortable.

The technique was competent, and it was made even better because I felt the love in Rit's fingers as she carefully worked over my back.

Tension eased from my body and mind, and I left everything to Rit.

"So, do you think you can win against Danan?" she asked while I closed my eyes and relaxed.

"Danan really is strong. And training with him only makes it clearer just how incredible he is."



“Yeah. If I had to guess, I’d say that Danan is the strongest person in the world, other than Ruti.”

“He’s the embodiment of martial arts.”

“But you’re still going to fight him, right?”

“Of course. He’s an old comrade.”

Danan didn’t understand the concept of living slow and easy.

Undoubtedly, he was struggling to comprehend why Ruti and I elected to remain in Zoltan.

I would have to convey the life I chose through battle.

To bid an ally and friend a proper farewell we could both accept, that was the least I could do.

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Two days later, just as the sun began to drift from its peak in the sky, Danan and I stood opposite each other.

My sword and Danan’s fist had both been doused with Merciful potion.

Hits wouldn’t leave any wounds, but we’d still feel the pain. A direct hit from Danan at full strength was liable to knock me out.

“Hahhhhh...”

I let out a long exhale, honing my senses.

“...”

There was no smile on Danan’s face, only the expression of a warrior about to face a serious battle.

“Okay.” Ruti stood between us with her right hand raised. If something dangerous was about to occur, she was the only one who could stop our fight. “No grudges.”

She looked to both of us. Danan and I nodded.

“All right... Start.”

The moment her hand came down, Danan kicked off the ground. He closed a distance greater than five meters in a single stride.

“Red...!” I heard Rit gasp.

However...

“Tch?!”

...Danan slipped past me to the right. My sword came up, slicing through the space where my opponent had been an instant earlier.

“Martial Art: Trampling Kick!”

A backward spinning kick from a dodge.

Martial Arts had set motions, and they typically couldn’t be employed without first returning to a neutral stance. Danan had studied and trained his movements to loose them from any position, however.

The man was a definite musclehead, but when it came to fighting, he learned and experimented constantly.

The first time I heard him speak about complex theories on techniques, I was stunned by the discrepancy between his typical demeanor and his studious nature regarding combat.

Had I been ignorant of his abilities, I would never have been able to evade that kick.

“Gh!”

My sword hit Danan’s leg.

The limb was protected by energy from Danan’s martial art, so my hit didn’t do much damage, but I’d managed to land the first blow.

“Hrahhhhhhh!!!”

Danan hurled a series of attacks my way.

Each had the force of a knockout. Taking one hit would spell my defeat.

“Amazing! How is he dodging?!” Yarandralla exclaimed as she watched from the sidelines.

I was parrying, evading, leaping back, and slipping away, using every defense maneuver in my arsenal to survive Danan’s onslaught.

“...There!”

Threading the needle through his barrage, I thrust my sword at Danan’s chest.

“?!”

To my surprise, the blade was deflected, knocked into the air.

Not good!

“Hiyahhhh!”

Now that I’d lost my weapon, Danan went straight for me.

“Martial Art: Rockbreaker!”

His attack closed in.

Instead of dodging, I grabbed Danan’s arm and redirected the force of his Martial Art to throw the burly man behind me.

Danan’s body was hurled upward, but he adjusted his posture and landed cleanly on the ground.

My sword finished its arc and stuck itself into the soil next to him.

“...”

He glanced at the blade, then walked over and picked it up.

“It really is just a bronze sword.”

Danan tossed the weapon to me. I caught it with my right hand and reassumed my stance immediately.

“I should be way stronger than you, but you manage to overcome my attacks and counter.”

Danan’s serious expression gave way to a smile. “You really are fun, Gideon.”

“...Knowing you, I’m sure you’ve already figured out how to win.”

“Well, yeah. You can handle my attacks because you predict what I’ll do.”

“That’s right.”

Danan’s fist came faster than I could defend. Reacting didn’t give me enough time. Yet no matter how swift a move was, it was easy to parry if you acted first.

I’d fought back-to-back with Danan many times during our journey. To survive, I’d learned everything that my comrades could and couldn’t do.

I understood his thought process and could deduce what he’d try next.

“In other words, if I try things I never have, hold back just a little, then I’ll win.”

“That’s right. If you don’t go all out, I won’t be able to anticipate your actions... Is that what you’re going to do?”

“Of course not. This isn’t a death match. It’s sparring. I’m fighting you with the best that I can muster—my ultimate self. There’d be no point if I reined it in.”

“I figured you would say that.”

“Heh-heh.”

That was the sort of man he was. That was the man I had come to trust and respect on my journey, the world’s strongest pugilist.

“Let’s do this, Gideon! If you can see through me at full power, then I’ll have to show you an even stronger version of myself!”

“Hah. So intense!”

“Fighting a guy I respect who possesses a deep understanding of my art? How could I not get fired up?!”

“Bring it, Danan! I’ll match your strength with the experience of my own life!”

Danan dashed forward.

I readied my defense, focusing on his movements.

My mind clear, I saw countless techniques that Danan might utilize. As he drew closer, infinite possibilities were reduced to just one:

an overhead thrust into Martial Art: Ax Kick. A stomp as a follow-up into a middle attack from close range.

I evaded by leaning forward, hurled a kick of my own, then leaped back while aiming for Danan’s leg with my sword to halt the stomp, following up with an upward cut while his momentum stalled.

“...Gh!”

Danan just barely avoided it by the skin of his teeth.

I would’ve liked to have followed up, but stepping in was dangerous. It could have easily turned things against me.

We both stopped moving for a moment and then leaped back.



When I awoke, I was buried in broken stones by the side of the river.

“Hahhh...”

Three hours and twenty-seven minutes had passed since the beginning of the bout.

We’d fought the whole time without a break. Ultimately, I’d taken a punch from Danan, gone flying, and lost.

“Owwww... Guess I was right about not being able to endure a direct hit.”

I would have died for sure without the Merciful potion.

Danan really is strong.

“Gideon.” Danan offered his big, rough hand to me. “Thanks. It was fun.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since I enjoyed a fight like this.”

I grabbed his hand, and he pulled me up, flashing a big grin.

“You really are strong, Gideon.”

“There’s a solid level gap between us, but it seems like I didn’t disappoint you.”

“Of course not. Since the day we met, I’ve always respected you.”

My legs were still unsteady. I could only manage to walk by leaning on Danan’s shoulder.

“You know, I...” Danan was looking ahead. “I didn’t get this whole slow life thing at all.”

“I figured.”

“That was why I wanted to fight you. It’s all I know.”

“Have you learned anything about the slow life?”

“Nope. It still doesn’t make any sense to me,” Danan said, beaming. “But I know now that you didn’t stop fighting because you believed you were weak.”

“...”

“And that’s enough for me. You’re still the same strong man I respect. You just chose a different path, is all.”

“Things were different during my first days in Zoltan. My whole life had been spent trying to support Ruti. When I first arrived here, I was a weak person.”

“Ha-ha, well, it’s good you improved. I might have killed you without thinking if I’d seen you like that.”

“You really are a scary guy sometimes!”

I can’t tell if you’re joking or serious when you say it so earnestly!

“Yet as beaten down as you were, you managed to become the man I respect again. This slow life thing must be a form of strength.”

Danan was trying to understand me in his own way.

“Now I can leave Zoltan without any regrets.”

“That’s good.”

“Gideon...”

“What?”

“Live your life how you please. If taking it easy here is what gives you power, then do it like your life depends on it.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?”

“Leave the demon lord’s army to me. I’ll crush all of ’em with the same left arm that hammered you.”

“...Thanks, Danan.”

“I don’t need gratitude. I fight because I want to. That’s who I am. I’m the kind of guy who can’t do anything else... That’s my pride.”

“Yeah, I always respected that unwavering strength of yours.”

“Heh-heh...”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Our laughter rang out in the quiet forest as we stood there leaning against each other.

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Time flies when you are having fun.

My match with Danan had concluded, and our group was on the way back to Zoltan.

“You okay, Danan?”

“Yeah, today was the best.”

He was trembling because Ruti had asked for a bout after the fight with me.

Ruti was revved up to get revenge for her big brother, and Danan was amped for the chance to battle the strongest person in the world. Ultimately, he was literally sent flying.

“It reminded me how amazing you were to conduct practice matched with Ruti during her training,” Danan said.

“Those were more about checking each other’s techniques than defeating each other,” I replied.

“Still... Damn. How do I win?” Danan had a serious look on his face as he considered a way to defeat Ruti. He was probably the only person in the world who’d dare to try such a thing. “I wanna rechallenge you after I murder the demon lord.”

Ruti nodded. “Sure.”

During our travels in the old days, she’d never shown any interest in Danan, but things were different now. There was a slight trace of a smile on her lips.

And seeing that made me really glad.

“Hmm?” Ruti looked to the north, as though sensing something.

“Brother, a village is being attacked.”

“What?”

Looking in the direction she was pointing, I spied smoke rising in the distance.

Rit cast a tailwind magic on the two of us. “You and Ruti go first, we’ll follow after!”

“Got it! Let’s go, Ruti!”

“Mhm.”

I accelerated in the blink of an eye using Lightning Speed. Ruti added another spell to increase her speed and ran after me. It took the two of us a couple of minutes to reach the distant village.

“Goblins, Big Brother.”

A band of the monsters was attacking the little settlement.

“There’s an awful lot of them. Did this group migrate from somewhere else?”

There were over thirty goblins armed with crafted weapons. They even lobbed firebombs made using oil in jars.

“Did some noble train them as a mercenary force? Maybe they were abandoned after the noble realized they couldn’t be employed as first hoped.”

“A nuisance.”

“Yeah, it sure is.”

We attacked the goblins from behind.

“*What?!*” one shouted with a strong goblin accent.

It tried to fight back with a spear, but this was nothing compared to sparring against Danan. We ran through the creatures, defeating all of them without giving any a chance to counterattack.

“There should be more within the village... But it looks like they’re already down.”

This settlement seemed to be home to a pretty competent fighter. The fight deeper in had already concluded.

“*What?!!*” Upon seeing the two who’d been fighting, I couldn’t stop the word from coming out.

One of them was Bishop Shien, the head of Zoltan’s church who’d gone to Last Wall fortress to deal with the incident with Veronia. The other was a gallant young man swinging a sword with his left hand.

“Albert.”

“It’s been a while, sir.”

Albert’s proud, strained demeanor was gone, replaced by a modest earnestness.

The Champion Albert Leland.

Zoltan’s former hero.



“Thank you for your help.”

“With that many goblins, we wouldn’t have been able to prevent some damage to the village.”

“It’s lucky that we happened to be nearby.”

Ruti and I were talking with Shien and Albert in the center of town.

The goblins had been slain. Two buildings had been razed, but no one had died. A couple had injuries, but Shien was tending to them.

It was fortunate for a place with no soldiers to survive a goblin raid of that scale with so little damage.

“We were returning to Zoltan from Last Wall fortress when we saw the goblins marching here. Surely, this is God’s mercy.”

Shien signed a holy symbol and offered his thanks to Demis while Albert picked up where the older man had left off.

“We ran to the village and protected the people before the goblins arrived. Thankfully, you two came along shortly after.” Albert’s tone was softer. As if his old prickly tone had just been a lie.

“Our friends should be here soon. Danan wants to thank you, Albert.”

“Me?” Albert looked shocked, and his face turned red. “That is an honor.”

Anyone who knew the old Albert and saw him now would surely be surprised.

“Bishop Shien, how did negotiations with the church go?” Ruti asked.

“Oh, this is excellent timing,” Shien replied. “Let’s head over there to talk a bit.”

“Big Brother?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll chat with Albert a bit.”

Ruti and Shien headed over to the village elder’s house.

The bishop had gone to negotiate a nonviolent resolution to the Leonor incident to keep the church from going to war with Veronia. Judging by his demeanor, he’d been successful.

“Sir,” Albert stated.

“I can’t quite get used to all this polite speech from you.” The first time I’d ever spoken to him, he’d demanded I show him respect. The memory was almost nostalgic.

“Ha-ha. Back then, I never would’ve dreamed that one of the heroes I idolized was living in Zoltan.”

“I thought you went off with Theodora to fight the demon lord’s army. What are you doing heading back to Zoltan with Bishop Shien?”

“In part, I’m acting as his guard, although my greater purpose was to tell you and Ruti something... Theodora is coming to Zoltan.”

“She is?!”

“Yes...I came to explain the situation before her arrival.” Albert looked serious.

She’s coming to Zoltan?

To find out she was coming to Zoltan on the same day that I sparred with Danan as a farewell...

Life and its encounters were indeed mysterious.

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Back in Zoltan, after parting ways with Bishop Shien, we headed to Ruti’s mansion.

Ruti, Rit, Yarandralla, Tisse, Danan, Albert, and I were all gathered around the table.

“I didn’t expect to see you again so soon, Albert.”

Danan wore a happy smile. Albert, on the other hand, was at a loss, unsure why the burly man seemed so pleased.

“I didn’t get a chance to properly thank you for your help.” Danan stood and bowed his head deeply. “I owe you my life.”

“S-sir! Someone like me...!”

“If you weren’t there, I would’ve died. I’ll never forget that.”

Albert was confused by Danan’s behavior. Among the various heroes of the world, Danan stood near the top. For him to call Albert a savior and lower his head in gratitude would take time for the reformed man to process.

The greatest Martial Artist was the sort of guy who stated exactly what he was thinking, whether grateful or angry. It didn’t matter if the person he was speaking to was powerful or weak. He offered Albert praise with total sincerity.

“Good. I’ve finally said my piece.” Having given his thanks at last, Danan sat back down, evidently satisfied.

Albert looked dumbfounded by the whole exchange, and I couldn’t help chuckling a bit.

“*Ahem*,” Albert coughed, trying to collect himself. “Anyway, I came here to pass a message to Red and Ruti.”

“From Theodora?”

Albert nodded at my inquiry.

“Yes, although she is currently going by the name Escarlata.”

So that masked mercenary truly was Theodora.

“You don’t seem too surprised,” Albert remarked.

“After reading about Escarlata in the newspaper, it was hard to imagine anyone other than Theodora accomplishing what she did.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you deduced as much.”

“What did Theodora—sorry, Escarlata—want?” I asked.

“...”

“What is it?”

Albert furrowed his brow. “Sorry, I’m at a loss for how to explain it.”

“Is it that complex?”

“...Indeed. Truthfully, I’m not sure how well I grasp it.”

“For now, just start with the facts. We can speak up about any parts that don’t make sense.” This was an old method I’d taught subordinates who struggled to deliver reports back when I was in the Bahamut Knights.

“Understood...” Albert took a deep breath. “A new Hero has appeared. His name is Van of Flamberge. And he’s bound for Zoltan to claim the demon lord’s ship, the *Vendidad*.”

There were many things we should have asked after hearing this shocking claim, but we were all quiet. It was difficult to accept Albert’s story, and we were left to stare at him in silence.

Interlude

The Hero Destroys Evil

The Golden Deer was a tavern near the port of Lark, a trading city.

A single boy sat in the middle of the bar filled with lively sailors and adventurers.

He had a replica of the Holy Demon Slayer, the Hero's sword, at his waist, and the red emblem of the Hero was emblazoned on his breastplate.

His eyes scanned the room, taking in the bustle of the tavern as though relishing it.

"It's so lively. I've been surprised countless times since leaving the monastery."

"Everyone seems to be having fun!" replied a high-pitched female voice, although the boy appeared to be alone. Following the sound led the eye to a little figure sitting on his breastplate.

"Hey, Van, are the humans here having a festival?"

The tiny figure—a fairy—leaped nimbly from his armor into the air.

"Lavender, it's dangerous for you to come out in places like this."

"But you'll protect me, right?"

"Of course. With my very life."

"Eek."

Lavender shivered, and her cheeks flushed.

The fairy had lived in the jungle and joined Van's party to guide the Hero to where the behemoth guarded the secret forest treasure. Afterward, she decided to continue traveling with Van and became a true member of the group.

"You're a fellow comrade who fights for justice. We only defeated the wicked behemoth because you revealed its weakness."

"Hee-hee, I would do anything for you, Van."

Lavender landed on Van's shoulder and kissed his cheek with her small lips.

Van blushed like an innocent young boy.

The fairy seemed to take delight in that and hugged his cheek.

Suddenly, there came a loud clatter.

“What are you smirkin’ about, asshole?!” A drunk man leaped to his feet. He was wearing animal pelts and sported a coarse beard. The subject of his ire was another man in leather armor that had been dyed gray. Despite the threats hurled at him, the man in gray leather continued to grin.

Arguments like this one were common in a pub. Wild, inebriated sailors formed a ring around the pair, cheering for what they knew was coming.

“Oy! I’m talkin’ to you! Say somethin’!” The man with the scraggly beard grabbed the one in gray leather by the collar.

“Th-th-this is justified self-defense.”

“Ah...?”

After a wet sound of cut flesh, blood spilled on the floor. The sailors all went silent.

The man in the leather armor was clutching a small, sharp knife in his hand.

“I-I have the Manslayer blessing. S-s-sometimes I have to kill someone to quell the urges.” He looked around the crowd. “A-anyone a friend of his? G-g-going to attack me for revenge?”

The man in gray leather wore a twisted grin.

“Manslayer, huh?” Van stood from his seat.

“Are you going to get him, Van?” Lavender asked.

“Yup.”

A moment later...

“Eh?”

...the man in leather armor was shocked to find his world had turned upside down. He tried to say something else but found he couldn’t speak. It was when he saw the floor rapidly approaching that he realized his neck had been cut, and he was dying.

“The villain has been defeated.”

Van sheathed his sword.

Destroying evil was the Hero’s natural responsibility. Van didn’t spare his victim so much as a glance while he returned to his seat.

“Ahhhhhhh!!!”

Tavern patrons screamed and ran out the door. The owner was at a loss, paralyzed and trembling behind the counter.

Van nodded at the sight. “How sad. He must have been terribly frightened of that Manslayer.”

“Mhm. Mhm.”

“Perhaps I should’ve felled him the moment the argument began.”

“True! You’re right, Van!”

Van and Lavender continued enjoying a pleasant drink in the now silent establishment.

“What happened here?” called a masked knight when she entered

the tavern. Behind her stood a large man with an odd look on his face.

“Esta! Ljubo!”

Van beamed, overjoyed to reunite with the two after they’d gone off to gather information.

The masked knight Escarlata and Cardinal Ljubo, together with Lavender the fairy, formed the members of Van’s party.

“Two men are dead, and I would appreciate it if you could explain what happened.” Esta’s tone was clearly critical of Van.

“Van took care of a Manslayer.” Lavender did little to disguise her bristling annoyance. She adored Van alone and didn’t care for Esta or Ljubo.

“Yes, Lavender’s right. A Manslayer killed someone, so I killed him.”

“...Why did the Manslayer do that?”

“Huh?” Van cocked his head, confused. “Does it matter?”



“It’s important to know why a fight happens, to comprehend the reason behind murderous intent. You should have been able to capture him alive easily at your level, right?”

“Right.”

“Then it would have been better judgment to subdue him, get any information you could, and then decide whether to hand him over to the local law or kill him here.”

Van beheld Esta with eyes wide. “Why put so much thought into it? He was only a Manslayer.”

“But he was still a human being. People don’t live on the impulses of their blessings alone. They each have an individual will. You cannot forget that.”

“Ummm...” Van pondered Esta’s words for a moment, trying to understand. “I get it now. I think you’ve misunderstood, Esta.”

“What?”

“Ah, no, I’m not trying to say that you’re wrong.” Van smiled innocently. “I didn’t hate him for murdering someone, and I didn’t want to protect myself or keep him from hurting anyone else.”

“...What are you suggesting?”

“Demis gave that man his Divine Blessing. Murdering others was his God-given role. There was no sin or malice in his actions.”

“...”

“Wielding the Hero’s blade for my personal desires would be blasphemy. I fight only for Demis’s sake. I’d never kill a Manslayer who harms innocents to satisfy some petty hatred.”

“Then why did you kill him?” Esta pressed.

“Those with a blessing like Manslayer exist to be slain by others. I killed him so he could fulfill his role. He was a faithful servant of Demis. And the growth of my Hero blessing that I felt when I slew him is proof that he completed the role assigned by his blessing. How could I hate that?” Van clasped his hands together in prayer, utterly untroubled and guiltless. “I celebrate your life. Thank you for reaching me as a Manslayer. My Hero blessing that has grown because of your life will surely save the world.”

“...Van, you...”

Before Esta could say anything more, Cardinal Ljubo raised a large hand before the woman to stop her.

“This is what it means to be the Hero.”

“Right? That’s my Van!”

Ljubo and Lavender validated and praised Van.

“I am but a beginner Hero who has yet even to fight the demon lord’s army. I am certain that Ruti the Hero is an even greater embodiment of true faith to Demis.”

Van looked down, blushing slightly.

Lavender and Ljubo both smiled at his innocent, boyish gesture. Esta alone did not. Instead, her shoulders slumped.

Ruti and Van. They have the same blessing, and yet, they're so different.

Van smiled happily in a tavern filled with the scent of blood, guts, booze, and food.

Esta's expression tensed behind her mask, and she sighed. She'd lost count of how many times things like this had occurred since she began her journey with Van's company.

Chapter 2

A Long Vacation

Rit, Ruti, Tisse, Yarandralla, Danan, Albert, and I were gathered in Ruti's mansion for breakfast.

"The food you make really is tasty!"

"Mhm. Big Brother's cooking is always delicious."

Danan and Ruti were enjoying the meal.

Normally, Ruti would have eaten more elegantly, but evidently, Danan was rubbing off on her.

Admittedly, the sight of her enjoying a meal so thoroughly was adorable.

Back when she'd been the Hero, Ruti had only ever eaten meals to keep up appearances during negotiations with influential people.

A fully developed Hero blessing granted resistances and immunities to all sorts of things. The Hero could not be allowed to fall due to a simple lack of water or food.

Ruti's body remained in constant perfection. Even if she ate, the nutrients did not affect her body. She'd once described it as eating while always feeling full. Even if she tasted the flavors, they didn't connect to any deliciousness or a desire to eat.

Thanks to the power of the New Truth blessing that had formed in her, she was able to nullify the immunities that robbed her of those human qualities.

However, New Truth's power felt a bit too convenient. Nullifying one's own skills... It was as though Ruti's desire to be free from the Hero had been made manifest.

Divine Blessings were granted by Almighty Demis. There was no room for human desires to enter the mix. That's what all living records asserted anyway.

Most likely, Ruti's New Truth was not the work of God but something formed within her.

It was a power that went against the fundamental rules of this world—that every person was born with a Divine Blessing to grant them a set role in life.

"Thank you for the food."

Having finished her breakfast, Ruti politely wiped her mouth with a napkin, looking for all the world like a completely normal girl.

Ruti, who possessed a blessing that broke all the rules, and the completely unprecedented appearance of a second Hero...

What's going on...?

Whatever happened, I would always be there for Ruti. That wouldn't change.

"All right, now that breakfast's done." I looked around the table at everyone. "Let's talk about the Hero."

They all nodded.

"Albert, let me confirm things one more time."

"Yes, sir."

"The church has officially recognized Van as the Hero?"

"Yes, Cardinal Ljubo has taken on the role of his guardian, and an Appraisal was performed by someone with a Saint blessing. Father Clemens has also validated this new Hero as genuine."

"So the new Hero was recognized by the very top of the church's hierarchy... I suppose they have good reason to put their faith in this Van."

"Indeed. Ruti was a Hero who belonged to no organization, but this boy has been acknowledged by and works for the church."

"The church's Hero..."

I felt a bit of unease in the back of my mind at the notion.

The Hero embodied justice and righteousness. Any wrong could be justified with their approval. That only became more true when the Hero was backed by the church, the largest organization on the continent. If they crossed a line, it would be impossible to stop them.

No, there's no point worrying about something like that now. I don't have the right to complain after abandoning the Hero's journey.

"Van is the youngest son of the King of Flamberge. He was said to be living as a monk at a monastery in Avalonia when he was discovered by Cardinal Ljubo."

"Discovered by a cardinal, huh? If he had the Hero blessing, then he should have been out there fighting. If there was another Hero, we would have had a lot more strategic options," Danan grumbled.

"It's been, what, three years since we went to the Last Wall fortress?"

"That was when we met Theodora. It brings back memories. If the church had already known of Van back then, they definitely would've reacted strangely to the presence of two Heroes...but there was no sign of any trouble."

"Ruti's got a point. Seems like the church didn't know about Van when we visited."

So while Ruti was fighting, Van lived peacefully, far removed

from the flames of war.

I shook my head. "But that doesn't really mesh with what Albert told us about Van's personality."

Albert asserted that Van was a devout believer. It was hard to imagine he'd delay filling the role that the Hero demanded of him.

If he truly was that zealous and possessed the Divine Blessing of the Hero, then he would've taken action the moment the demon lord's army landed on the continent. He wasn't like Ruti, who only set out after she had no choice because our home was attacked.

I'd never met Van myself, so I couldn't be certain, but the stories still felt contradictory.

"Well, no use worrying about that now," Danan cut me off. "The problem is that this guy is coming here to Zoltan, right?"

"Yeah. That's the issue," Rit agreed.

"How much does the church know about Ruti retiring?"

Albert shook his head at Yarandralla's question. "As far as I'm aware, they're completely ignorant. News about the Hero's quest never spread much unless she took direct part in the war effort."

"Plus, there's all the rumors that spread around. Only people who witnessed the Hero in person know the truth."

"But give it half a year more, and folks will notice something's off."

"Even so, their first conclusion will be that the Hero failed and died."

Moving from battle to battle and trying to end a continent-scale war as an individual was impossible, even if that sole person's might was bolstered by blessing and level.

It wasn't enough for you to take on a few hundred people and win. The might to destroy the world still wasn't sufficient. Winning against a massive army capable of destroying the world all by yourself...such was the level of strength demanded of the Hero.

"Falling somewhere along the Hero's journey is the rule, not the exception. No one would be that shocked to hear that news. It's why I always told the rulers of kingdoms we visited not to assume the Hero would come to save them once we left," I remarked.

"You said that in Loggervia, too. You told us to prepare to fight once the Hero was gone." Rit wore a nostalgic smile.

"That's why I never worried about Ruti staying in Zoltan. But this new Hero coming changes things..."

Van the Hero and Cardinal Ljubo.

"Cardinal Ljubo will definitely recognize Ruti's face, and likely mine as well," I said. "We never really spoke with him, but we met while at the Last Wall fortress."

Cardinal Ljubo was a big man, around two meters and thirty

centimeters tall. Even among the key figures leading the church, he stood out.

Although all of the cardinals had their own quirks, as I recall...

“Running into him could mean trouble...”

So what should we do? I wondered.

“In that case,” Yarandrala began, raising her hand. I nodded for her to continue. “Why don’t you, Rit, and Ruti extend your holiday? Just take it easy in some village a short distance away from Zoltan until Van and his party finish what they came to Zoltan for.”

“Take it easy... Hmm.”

“Tisse and I can handle Ruti’s plantation and your store. Just think of it as a long vacation.”

Evading Van was paramount, and Yarandrala’s idea sounded like the safest option. Van’s goal was the beached *Vendidad*, so once he got the ship, he and his party would surely depart Zoltan. It was a strategically meaningless settlement that offered no reason for a Hero to stay.

“In that case, maybe I should stick around here a bit longer?”

“You sure, Danan? Cardinal Ljubo will recognize you, too.”

“Well, I’m not plannin’ on meeting them, but I’ve got a bad feeling about all this.”

“...Really? Your gut’s typically pretty accurate.”

I grimaced a bit as Danan grinned.

“Anyway, with me, Yarandrala, and Tisse hangin’ around, things will be fine. On the off chance that I do run into this new Hero, I’ve got a pretty solid excuse to convince them I got kicked out of Ruti’s party.”

Danan patted his right shoulder.

A pugilist who lost his dominant arm. I would’ve been hard-pressed to conjure a better excuse for someone to retire from the front line.

“But you’re stronger now than you were then,” Ruti said. Danan stood agape in surprise, then burst out laughing.

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The next day, we followed the river out of Zoltan until the evening—a distance of about forty kilometers.

Our destination was a village called Sant Durant, which sat in a valley.

Supposedly, during Zoltan’s earliest days, a famous lumberjack named Durant had died there.

He was no war hero, but when pioneers lost their homes and firewood to a hill giant attack, he’d gone out and felled tree after tree,

bringing the wood back and saving the settlers from the winter cold.

It was an appropriately Zoltan-esque story.

“Hmm. It’s a tranquil sort of place.”

I spied the village up ahead along the path following the river. Fields and wooden houses dotted the gentle slopes.

“When I heard it was a village in a valley, I imagined a more secluded place.”

“During the summer, it’s apparently pretty popular among the nobles who like to travel. Although rural and removed from Zoltan, it still seems to be pretty well set up.”

Spending the warm season in a place connected to an old hero sounded like the sort of thing some aristocrats would enjoy.

Its distance from Zoltan meant traveling merchants hardly ever came by, but with all the things nobles brought to the village, it wasn’t too remote.

“You’ve never been here before, right, Big Brother?”

“Never. Anytime I came this way, it was always to climb the mountains for herbs.”

The road was covered in weeds. Sant Durant’s wall to protect from monsters was better than I expected, likely thanks to some aristocrat’s support.

“Oh, travelers?”

A villager was standing on the lookout platform at the fence’s entrance.

“Yeah, we were hoping to stay here for a little while.”

“Wanderers are rare this time of year. I doubt the inn’s ready, but we can find you somewhere to stay.”

It was clear from his tone that these people were used to guests.

“Where should we head for the inn you mentioned?”

“The tavern right off the plaza has some rooms, but all the inn’s got is a corner of a stable and a blanket.”

I’d stayed in places like that back when I was a knight. But such accommodations would be a waste of our impromptu vacation.

“Ha-ha-ha. I can tell that’s not too appealing. In that case, follow the road to the plaza and look for the signs. Old Larry has cottages for rent, so try talking to him.”

“A cottage? That sounds nice. Thanks.”

“Once you’ve dropped off your bags, you should check out the general store in the plaza. The stuff you can get in these parts is a bit limited.”

“All right, we’ll stop by there later.”

“Enjoy your stay.”

The man smiled and let us into the village.



“Wow, they even have a gravel street,” Rit commented.

It was rare for a village of this size to have a properly maintained road instead of a worn dirt path.

“Thinking back, I’ve never really been to a tourist village.”

Ruti nodded. “It was never important during the fight against the demon lord’s army.”

“I’ve been to a couple of the biggest and most famous ones in Loggervia, but it’s my first time at a place like this!”

“Between the three of us, we’ve had just about every sort of adventure there is. Who would’ve guessed there was an entirely new experience so close by.”

“It’s neat!”

We all laughed cheerfully.

In the center of the round, gravel-paved plaza was a gallant-looking stone statue of Durant with his ax on his shoulder. Muscles bulged all over his body: the ultimate sort of macho man. The effigy was carved in normal stone, not marble, but it had been cleanly and neatly worked.

The sculptor had to be pretty skilled to depict such detail so well.

“Look! There’s a description on the board!”

“Let me see.”

The Hero Durant (Family Name Unknown)

He carried countless logs, saving people without shelter, people suffering from the cold, and people fearful of monsters.

All by the power of his great mass of muscle.

The ultimate macho man. A beauty of muscles.

“The sculptor had a bit of a muscle fetish, I guess... That might explain why the statue is so burly...”

“Art is born of passion.”

Rit was nodding to herself as she observed the statue from multiple angles.

It wasn’t too shocking that a princess knew about creative works. That was my Rit for you.

“But I prefer a build more like yours.”

“Ugh.”

Rit grinned at me.

Sheesh!



In this village, vacant homes were rented out as cottages for visitors.

Apparently, the nobles and wealthy merchants of Zoltan brought a servant or two to spend their time here in relaxation.

"It's rare to have visitors this time of year. Here are the keys to the rooms."

I took the brass ring of keys from Larry.

Apparently, he managed these properties with his wife.

The village was also a place where retired people could go for simple work.

The populace was mostly self-sufficient, and the windfall from seasonal tourism kept their infrastructure intact. I didn't know how many generations back it was, but whichever village elder worked to build the little town into what it was had to be brilliant.

"Perhaps a merchant or noble with some economic studies under their belt helped out."

"Maybe. Either way, we can enjoy the fruits of their work and have a nice long-term vacation."

"A training camp in the woods and now an elegant holiday in a cottage. The fun never stops."

I was still a little worried about Van the Hero, but, for now, it was best to enjoy ourselves. It would've been a waste not to.

Walking past the management lodge, we arrived at a little house surrounded by beautiful green trees.

"Ohhhh, this is pretty nice." Rit sounded excited.

"What's the inside like, I wonder?" I unlocked the door and opened it up.

The furniture and cookware hardly looked expensive, but they would definitely get the job done, and there was a warmth to the wood-carved accessories.

Even without any of the complex decorations that a luxury lodge for nobles from Central would sport, this cottage still managed a comfortable and bright atmosphere.

"This is really nice."

Ruti scurried from the entrance, eager to inspect all the rooms.

"There are three bedrooms, a full bath, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and the closet with cleaning supplies is right here. Oh, there's an outdoor dining table set in the yard, too."

"Seems pretty spacious."

"I'm sure one of the bedrooms is meant for a servant. There's also a water jug and washing spot connected to the back of the kitchen."

"Hmmm, what should we do, then? Shall we each take one of the three rooms?"

""No!"

Rit and Ruti immediately rejected my idea.

Despite having a trio of rooms at our disposal, we ended up all sleeping in one together.

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After checking out the cottage and dropping off our luggage, we returned to the plaza at the village center to visit the general store we'd heard about.

"Welcome. I was expecting you."

A middle-aged woman greeted us at the general store.

Evidently, word had already spread about our stay, so she greeted with no surprise.

The store's primary commodity was food, mainly vegetables. They sat in baskets, lining the tables. However, there were shelves offering candles, soap, pots, pans, and other sundries.

Set apart from all the other items was a hot sandwich maker with a mithril surface that food wouldn't stick to.

"Our village doesn't really have much for meat. There's dried fish from the river if you like, though."

"Dried fish, huh? That sounds pretty good. Yeah, I guess we could give that a try."

I bought a few more ingredients, too. The selection of vegetables was slim, but they'd all been grown well. I was looking forward to cooking with them.

"Hey, can we buy some candles, too?" Rit asked.

"We have stuff for light in the item box, though."

"But don't you think that a candlelit evening would be nice?"

"True, that does have a certain appeal. All right. Let's pick out a few."

We'd packed the essentials, of course, but using some local resources wasn't a bad idea, either.

"Hmm. Seems like there are two different kinds of candles."

"One type is for practical use, and the other is more for mood," the woman running the shop explained.

"Ah, in that case, a set of each, please."

I was curious to see what a mood candle entailed.

"Thank you."

The store tender saw us off with a bright smile, and we headed back to the cottage.

By the time we returned, it was already getting dark. The moon and a few stars had appeared overhead.

It seemed the perfect chance to test out the candles.

"Shall we see what this mood candle is like?"

I lit a wick.

“Ohhh, the flame is purple!”

Rit’s and Ruti’s eyes shone as they beheld the little light.

“Hmm, they must have something mixed into it. Interesting.”

“But it isn’t bright at all.”

“That’s why it’s for setting the mood. It’s meant to help enjoy the dark.” Laughing, I snuffed the mood candle and replaced it with a standard one.

“Hmm. There’s no smell.”

“I guess it wasn’t made with tallow.”

“For a little village removed from the city, it sure has a lot of nice things.” Rit looked impressed. “Seems like this will be a fun vacation!”

I grinned to see her enjoying herself.

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“All right, what should I do for dinner?”

Standing in the kitchen, I laid out the ingredients we’d purchased at the general store and the seasonings I’d brought along.

Trout, charr, and others. We certainly had a healthy selection of dried fish...

“Let’s go with tomato and sweetfish.”

I picked up the kitchen knife from home and got to work.

“I should probably begin with the sides.”

Baked potatoes with the tops cut open for cheese to be added before putting them in the oven. A vegetable soup with greens stir-fried in olive oil before they were added to the pot to simmer.

Preparing sides that would offer enough for everyone was the best choice.

And now for the main dish.

After cutting some garlic, I added some olive oil to a pan and started cooking it. Then I added a dried sweetfish to fry. The smell was excellent, and it made my stomach growl.

“Mm! That’s a nice aroma!”

“I can’t wait.”

Rit and Ruti called to me from the dining room. Clearly, they were getting excited.

With the two of them hungry and expectant, I’d better make sure this is delicious.

Steeling my resolve, I added the tomatoes I’d prepped in advance. Then I sprinkled some salt and covered the dish to let it simmer.

“And...done.”

I took the sweetfish out first and set them on a plate, pouring the remaining tomato-soup-like liquid over them afterward.

Steaming the dried fish in the tomatoes’ juices had cooked them

up nice and plump.

The red of the tomatoes over the fish made for a nice presentation—in my eyes anyway.

I should add a little bit of parsley for color, too.

“Okay, now to finish the rest.”

I pictured Rit’s and Ruti’s delighted expressions as I continued.

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The dishes I made lined the dining room table.

“Thanks for the food!”

“Thank you for the food.”

After energetic expressions of gratitude, Rit and Ruti started to dig in.

““Delicious!””

They looked pleased as they ate my cooking.

“It’s so plump.”

Ruti’s eyes gleamed after she tasted some of the fish.

Seeing her like that made all that effort preparing the meal worthwhile.

Now to have some myself... Mmm. Yeah, this came out well.

The dinner continued pleasantly, with smiles all around.

It was a lovely time.

Once we’d finished, the three of us went to the yard to enjoy the night’s breeze.

“We should buy some more of these candles when we leave.”

Rit watched the gentle purple flame wavering atop one candle on the table.

The glow wasn’t enough to illuminate much, but it had a certain beauty—almost magical.

“Yeah, once Van the Hero leaves Zoltan, I want to show this to Tisse and Yarandrala.”

“I bet Mister Crawly Wawly would like it, too.” Ruti wore a tranquil smile as she thought about her friends in Zoltan.

“Van the Hero...”

“Theodora—No, I guess she’s Esta now. If Esta’s prediction is correct, they should arrive in about a week, right?”

I nodded in response to Rit’s question. “I guess they’ll be going straight for the *Vendidad* when they get to Zoltan. The government won’t refuse a Hero and a cardinal. It’s not like anyone in Zoltan was going to use the ship anyhow.”

“I don’t know how they plan to move a boat that large, but if they have a Behemoth Ring, it should be pretty quick work.”

“A Behemoth Ring is a magic item that, according to legend,

allowed a little girl to carry an entire mansion full of giants. If the myth is to be believed, its power bolsters strength and carrying load tenfold, making it possible to lift absurd weights.”

“But will it be enough for that humongous ship? A giant’s mansion doesn’t begin to compare.”

“My guess is they intend to use a Communal Magic elixir. It shares magic cast upon someone with others for a limited time. By distributing a Behemoth Ring’s power among the party, they’ll be able to carry the *Vendidad* into the ocean.”

“Reproducing the effects of a legendary-tier magic item would take a rank-five draught, wouldn’t it? And they’d need a large quantity, too. Something like that would bust Loggervia’s national budget,” Rit said.

“The plan would be impossible if not for the backing of the biggest organization on the continent.”

On our journey, Ruti and I set out using the money I’d saved up for her. Questing with the church’s financial might behind you allowed for much more.

“If it lets them finish their business in Zoltan and leave faster, then that’s fine,” Ruti chimed in.

“True. It’d be a problem if they came to Zoltan without a plan and then lingered around trying to figure out a way to move the *Vendidad*. Their likely plan works out well for us.”

“And I know just how intense the Hero’s impulses are. He should be driven more by a desire for justice than the church’s designs.” Ruti’s analysis was probably correct. She was the foremost expert on the subject, after all. “For now, I just want to enjoy the vacation.”

“In that case, shall I make some honey milk? I still have a bit of honey left from the giant bees.”

“Hooray.”

Would that this easy calm could last forever.

Surely, all three of us thought as much as we enjoyed the peaceful night.

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Elsewhere, on an island south of Avalon...

The utterly barren isle was inhabited by salt dragons, one of the four types of dark dragons.

Once, this place was inhabited by fairies, a veritable paradise filled with flowers. Salt dragons arrived from the dark continent during the era of the original demon lord and invaded, transforming the haven into a lifeless wasteland.

“Salt dragons are creatures of stagnation and destruction. Their

breath corrodes everything, and their salt poisons the ground. They are destroyers of civilization, evil dragons that despise all advancement. Their existence nurtures the flames of wrath,” Ljubo explained, offering a description befitting a cleric.

“Yes, sir. The salt dragons are dark dragons who obey the demon lord. In other words, they are the Hero’s enemies!”

“Right, right. All wicked monsters are our foes, so let’s kill them!” Lavender encouraged. Van’s eyes gleamed at the notion of the Hero’s foes.

“Our goal is to recover the demon lord’s ship in Zoltan, isn’t it? I question whether there is any point in a diversion like this.”

Esta had raised this point countless times already on the journey.

“Because there is evil there.”

And Van’s reflexive answer remained unchanged.

“The dragons here are not at odds with any neighboring settlements. Should we go out of our way to go in and slay an enemy that won’t attack so long as no one disturbs this island or its waters?”

“Now, now, Esta, this is a perfect opportunity for Van to raise his level. And wasn’t a secret fairy treasure stolen by the salt dragons? Surely, obtaining such a prize wouldn’t be a waste.”

There was a greedy smirk on Ljubo’s lips.

“I have doubts about that legend. No such stories existed until the salt dragons took over. After they invaded, word of a secret Fairy King’s Shield began to spread. It’s possible the salt dragons brought it.”

“Eh, maybe.” Ljubo only offered a bored reply.

“It’s okay,” Van responded cheerfully. “Defeating monsters and attaining treasures is just. It’s written in the church’s scriptures.”

Seeing Van’s innocent smile, Esta gave up arguing.

The boy was correct; slaying monsters and gathering valuables was good according to Demis’s teachings.

“But if you go around thoughtlessly making enemies, you’ll come to regret it. You shouldn’t lose track of what needs to be prioritized.”

“No, that’s wrong, Esta. The Hero exists to destroy all evil. I am the enemy of all wickedness.”

“...Okay. If that’s your Hero path, then I suppose I shouldn’t push further.”

Van had a very different view on being the Hero than Ruti ever did.

To think it was so difficult to be a guide... I wish I could talk with Sir Gideon.

No, I donned this mask to hide my identity. There’s no way I can meet with him now.

Esta took her place at the front of the party, as she always did.

Nine days later, they arrived in Zoltan.

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It was the tenth day since we'd come to Sant Durant.

"It's already been ten days. Taking it easy is nice, but there hasn't been any news," Rit said while sitting in a chair and drinking some juice.

Instead of her usual clothes, she was wearing a bikini top, shorts, and sandals.

No matter how you looked at it, that was a summer outfit, even though it was a spring afternoon.

"It's so hot today."

Rit smiled.

Sheesh... Between her breasts and thighs, I'm not sure where I should look. Not that I mind, though.

"Eh-heh-heh. You should wear something a little more revealing instead of your normal clothes."

"But I like this shirt. It's cool in summer and warm in winter."

"Boooooo."

I grimaced. Rit was cute even when giving her disapproval.

"Brother."

"Oh, did you change, too, Ru...ti...?"

"Mhm. I did."

Like Rit, she'd decided against her usual attire.

"I borrowed your shirt. It's cool in summer and warm in winter. It's a nice shirt."

Ruti seemed in an excellent mood.

The size obviously didn't match at all. It was loose and billowy on her. And also...

"Why aren't you wearing anything under it?"

"I always wear dresses, so I didn't bring any pants or skirts."

She only had underwear on beneath my shirt.

I can't let any other guys see her like that. If any did, I might draw my sword unconsciously.

"Ah! I didn't think of that!"

I wasn't sure what Rit was shouting about.

I couldn't wear either of their clothes, so if Rit took my remaining shirt, I wouldn't have anything to wear for myself.

"Big Brother's shirt... Heh-heh."

Ruti seems to be enjoying herself, so I guess it's okay?

"Anyway, I wonder what's going on back home."

"Esta judged that they would reach Zoltan in a week, so they should be there by now, right?"

“Should I go check?” Rit suggested. “They won’t recognize me.”

“No, let’s just trust the others and behave ourselves. It’s not as if Van is searching for Ruti. I’d like to avoid going back and forth to Zoltan if we can help it.”

“I guess you’re right. We would’ve heard something if there was trouble.”

“This is a Hero we’re talking about. I don’t think they’ll do anything bad. We can just wait for them to leave.” So saying, I took a seat in my chair. “Maybe I should have some juice, too.” I poured myself a cup from the bottle. The amber-colored apple juice was perfect for this weather.

It was meant to be apple wine, but it hadn’t entirely fermented yet, so there was hardly any alcohol to it. The taste was strong and sweet, and it really hit the spot when cut with a bit of water.

“So, what should we do this afternoon?”

“How about reading outside?”

“I want to take a walk through the forest.”

“Hmm. I think we can manage both.”

We had time, so I saw no reason not to indulge in everything we wanted.

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Foreign sailors in Zoltan’s harbor district had been drinking since lunch and were singing raucously.

They’d brought in a large amount of lumber on their ship.

The wood was for repairing civilian vessels damaged during the war with Veronia and repairing a few of those lost. The double-masted, triangle-sailed caravel the sailors had arrived on was for the Zoltan navy. Although a secondhand boat, it was still a newer model and much swifter than the older ships moored in town.

As Zoltan’s flagship, it was renamed the *Glory of Zoltan*. There was a well-worn feeling to it, but it was still clearly a newer boat. Lord William was quite pleased with it, even planning a ceremony to celebrate its acquisition. The foreign sailors were still in town because they’d been invited to the party and had been offered free food and drinks.

Amid the slightly-livelier-than-usual harbor district, a small shadow and an even smaller shadow stood together on a pier.

“It’s peaceful,” the girl beneath the hood, Tisse, muttered while fishing. Beside her, Mister Crawly Wawly had his own thread in the water, too.

“They’re really taking their time getting here...”

Tisse and Mister Crawly Wawly’s goal was to find Van the Hero.

Danan and Albert were watching the city gate in case the Hero came by land.

“Did they take a detour?”

Mister Crawly Wawly cocked his head, as if to say “Who knows?”

The next instant, he moved his legs in surprise.

His thread jerked, and the spider grabbed it with two forelegs and pulled, his small, round body shuddering.

“You can do it, Mister Crawly Wawly!”

Emboldened by the cheer, the spider struggled with the taut strand.

The water’s surface bubbled, and a giant shadow (compared to Mister Crawly Wawly) rampaged like a furious dragon.

Mister Crawly Wawly ran left and right, carefully controlling the tension so that his line didn’t snap.

Tisse held her breath as she watched the intense battle.

“This is a fight that will go down in history!”

Just when it seemed like the battle would never end...the shadow below the waves began to slow.

Deciding that was the moment, Mister Crawly Wawly poured all his strength into his legs and pulled.

There was a big splash, and the giant shadow was tugged upward toward the pier.

“Don’t let your guard down!” Tisse warned.

Mister Crawly Wawly skittered back, and no sooner had he done so than a blade came crashing down where he’d been standing.

“That’s...a king crab!”

It was a giant crustacean. With its legs spread, it measured over a meter in length. Spikes grew from its shell, giving it the appearance of an evil knight’s armor.

“What is a king crab doing here?! They aren’t supposed to live around Zoltan!”

Tisse couldn’t glean anything from the crustacean’s beady black eyes. It merely readied its claws, determined to defeat its enemies rather than back down.

Fortunately, Mister Crawly Wawly was a species of jumping spider.

Leaping to avoid a plunging claw, he attempted to attack the crab from above.

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The crab defended itself against the attack and left a wound on Mister Crawly Wawly’s round stomach with its left claw.

These are the famous words of Chi Chi Long, the brown rat with the Divine Blessing of the Martial Artist, a great kung fu master of the animal world:

“A crab has two claws.”

It was an important maxim.

The king crab followed up with its right claw to finish the battle; its left was raised over its head, ready to intercept a jump.

It was an invincible stance, like a warrior wielding a sword and shield.

However, Mister Crawly Wawly did not leap up high, instead lunging forward, low to the ground.

Mister Crawly Wawly could jump over ten times the length of his own body, and he used every bit of his leg strength to advance, creating his very own version of Lightning Speed.

Closing in on the king crab, Mister Crawly Wawly then launched himself high.

“Finisher! Rising Spider Punch!”

Mister Crawly Wawly could not speak, so Tisse gave voice to his ultimate technique for him.

Admittedly, she'd concocted it on the spot, but she was pleased with how cool it sounded nonetheless.

It was a blow that focused every bit of Mister Crawly Wawly's jumping strength in a single point on his front leg, and it had enough force to bust through the shelled abdomen of the king crab.

Even the king crab was left stunned by the impact, and it collapsed, causing the ground to tremble.

Landing on the ground, Mister Crawly Wawly raised both his front legs in a victory pose.

“Amazing!” Tisse applauded him. “Let's have crab hot pot tonight.”

Tisse was happy, but Mister Crawly Wawly could not eat crab stew, so he shook his head, lowered a thread to the water, and started fishing again. He glanced over at Tisse.

“What is it? ‘By the way, did you reel in anything, Tisse?’ Er...”

Tisse only went for the big catches. There were times she could spend the whole day without fishing up anything. That was just what the activity was to her, but Mister Crawly Wawly teasing her after he landed his own haul was frustrating.

“Just you watch. I'm going to find something amazing soon.”

Mister Crawly Wawly gently waved his leg, as if to console Tisse, and the girl gritted her teeth.

The two of them were having fun in their own way.

“Hmm?”

Sensing something, Tisse peered out past the river.

A high-speed sloop, and the flag is the church's... Looks like they finally arrived.

Tisse continued fishing as she watched. Mister Crawly Wawly

immediately started moving to get word to Yarandra and the others.

“Now then.” A light tug at her line, and Tisse removed the bait from the hook to keep any fish from distracting her.

Her mission was to inform her friends that Van the Hero had arrived and to learn his voice and face, all without making direct contact or being followed, of course.

I wonder what sort of person this second Hero is.

Preconceptions lead to bad results.

Tisse had been taught as much as a hired killer, but she couldn't help but picture Ruti.

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“It can't even hold a proper ship? What a shabby port,” Cardinal Ljubo grumbled as he stepped out of the landing craft.

“Ljubo.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Under Van's critical eye, the cardinal apologized and rubbed the back of his head with one hand.

“Heh.” Esta chuckled slightly.

“What is it?”

The masked woman shook her head at Van's inquiry. “Nothing. I merely recalled an old comrade. He said something similar.”

“You've been to Zoltan before?”

“It was only a short stop. I'm hardly equipped to give you a tour.”

“Hah-hah, it's not like we're here to go sightseeing anyway... So, this old comrade. Was he a hero like you?”

“It's hard to say.”

“I'd love to meet him.”

“Unfortunately, you won't have the opportunity.”

“Right, we have to slay the demon lord, so we can't take any unnecessary detours.”

“No, he died. That's why you can't meet him.”

Van gasped. “My apologies for causing you to remember something painful.”

“It's nothing to trouble yourself over. I'm the one who thought of it.”

“Right, right! You didn't do anything wrong, Van! He probably died from the stress of Esta's lectures.”

“Hey now, Lavender!”

When Van scolded the fairy sitting on his shoulder, she looked over at Esta and stuck out her tongue before fleeing into Van's pocket.

“Let's find a place to stay. I'm not the best with sea travel.” Cardinal Ljubo seemed ready to get some rest.

Lavender quickly emerged again. “Poor Ljubo! How many times

did you throw up on the boat?"

"I don't have the energy to indulge your banter, so behave yourself and play with Van."

"Hooray! I have permission from the cardinal!" Hugging onto the side of Van's face, Lavender rubbed her cheek against his. The boy looked embarrassed.

"Do you know a good inn around here, Esta?"

The masked woman pondered Lavender's question for a moment. "Zoltan has a central district at the core of the city; a northern district with farms and an Adventurers Guild; a southern district home to merchants and craftsmen; a harbor district, which is where we are presently; and the slums of South Marsh. In terms of quality lodgings, the central or northern districts are probably best, but considering what we are here for, the harbor district is likely the most efficient. We're going to have to gather many people if we hope to move the *Vendidad*."

Turning to face the river, Esta looked out at the black metal ship beached on a sandbar in the middle of the water.

"That isn't the demon lord's vessel anymore; starting today, it belongs to the Hero."

Van beheld the *Vendidad* with a boyish curiosity and excitement.

Tisse, who was watching from a distance, was stunned.

That's the new Hero? He's so expressive. Nothing at all like Ms. Ruti.

Tisse didn't know why, but for some reason, she felt terribly uneasy.

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Come evening in Sant Durant, Ruti, Rit, and I were having fun playing a board game called Wyvern Race.

"I'm betting ten coins on Big Brother's dragon."

"Geh, so if I win this last race, that means you'll end in the lead?"

"That's a bold strategy, but if you lose ten coins now, it'll be tight for you to come back."

"I'm betting all of the rest of my coins on my own dragon."

"Ummm... So even if I win this race, you'll still be ahead, if only barely. If you do that, I'll have no choice but to maneuver to make Rit's dragon win the race. Are you okay with a two-versus-one? If her dragon wins, you'll lose everything."

"Challenge accepted. I trust my dragon."

"Ohhh! So this race is the decisive fight!"

We were having fun rolling the dice.

It was a pleasant evening.

Knock, knock.

There was a sound at the door.

"Is it the manager?" Rit stood and went to check.

"It's not the manager. It's a friend," Ruti said.

"A friend?" Rit opened the door. "Mister Crawly Wawly?!"

The spider was riding a pigeon, and he raised his right front leg in greeting.

What a sight: an arachnid messenger.

"He really is a high-spec spider."

Even Rit was surprised.

She showed him and the pigeon in. Mister Crawly Wawly tapped the ground with his front legs.

"Ahh, you want to thank the pigeon?"

I didn't have a skill to talk with spiders, but Mister Crawly Wawly was intelligent and capable enough with communication that I'd begun to grasp what he wanted to convey.

I got a plate with some beans that the pigeon might be able to eat.

While I did, Mister Crawly Wawly caught an insect and had something to eat himself.

"Sorry I couldn't provide any food for you, Mister Crawly Wawly."

His body quivered, as if to reply that it wasn't an issue. Then he lifted his fifth leg up. There was a small piece of paper tied to it.

"A message from Tisse?"

I took it from the spider's leg and opened it.

"The Hero arrived. No issue at present..."

That was the entirety of the message.

"All right, then we won't be able to go back to Zoltan for a little while longer."

"Hopefully Van takes the *Vendidad* quickly and leaves."

"The negotiations with Zoltan will require a couple of days. The rest depends on the strength of their Behemoth Ring and how many elixirs they have."

Looking outside, I realized it had gotten pretty dark.

"Do you want to stay the night?"

Mister Crawly Wawly nodded.

"Okay, I'll have to get something for the pigeon to sleep on."

"Coo."

"Right..."

I pulled one of the clay plates I used for preparation from my bag and held it out for the pigeon.

"What do you think? Would this be a good fit for sleeping?"

"Coo!"

Seems it's pleased with the idea.

I set the dish down on the bed in one of the rooms we weren't using, and the pigeon settled in to rest.

Flying a forty-kilometer route in one go with that small body... Birds really are amazing.

“Hmm...” Van the Hero was in Zoltan. I was a little concerned what might happen. “Still, it’s nothing for us to worry about.”

My and Ruti’s goal was to avoid Van and his party. We had to trust Tisse and the others and remain here, taking it easy. That was the best course of action. Letting our unease get in the way would be a waste.

“For now, let’s continue our game.”

I picked up a die again and faced the board. Mister Crawly Wawly was waiting there, holding a die in his forelegs.

“Huh? You want to play, too, Mister Crawly Wawly?”

He really is a high-spec spider.

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The next day, after having some breakfast, we saw Mister Crawly Wawly and the pigeon off and started our day.

Ruti, Rit, and I had talked about taking a stroll through the village, and we decided it was time, so we set out along the gravel-paved path.

We enjoyed the view of the green wheat swaying in fields sowed upon steps along the mountain slopes. Here and there, we spied villagers out watering the crops.

“It looks like they’re drawing water from irrigation channels up the peak. The source seems plentiful because the village is nice and clean, too.”

It was common for villages farther from cities to struggle a bit with infrastructure and end up dirtier for it, but the roads and buildings here were all well maintained. Living in a place that had no water supply issues was a boon for sure.

“I wonder what the nobles who come here to escape the heat do?” Rit said. “Do they just lie around in their cottages eating and reading, or do they go swimming in the river? There aren’t any places to go hunting nearby.”

“Yeah, I haven’t really noticed any larger game around here.”

Meat wasn’t a large part of the local diet, either. The people had fish from the river, chicken eggs, and milk from plow mares, so the lack of meat wasn’t a critical health problem, and nothing suggested it was an inconvenience.

“Nothing but fish is a bit trying, though.”

“Want to go hunting to see if there are any edible animals or monsters around?”

“It’s too much of a hassle to go to that length.”

“True.”

While we conversed...

“Owww!”

...there was a cry from one of the fields.

“What is it?”

We hurried in the direction of the cry.

“Agh...owww...”

Someone was groaning.

“Are you all right?” I called.

“Y-yeah...”

“I’m coming to help!”

With that, I rushed into the field, careful not to trample the wheat as I moved. A woman in her twenties had collapsed on the ground.

“Ugh...”

I gave her a quick examination. “A bruise on the hip... From a fall, I imagine. Can you speak?”

“H-here... It’s...”

Her voice was hoarse as she clutched her side.

“Rit, can you lessen the pain with your magic?”

“Got it! Spirit of water, wash away the pain.”

With a river nearby, this was the perfect place for water spirit magic. A little color returned to the woman’s pale face.

“Is there a doctor in this village?” I questioned.

She shook her head.

“Let me check a little bit.”

I carefully touched her stomach.

“Let me know if the pain gets worse.”

Waiting for her to nod, I touched a couple of different locations.

“Ah! Owww!”

“The pain is worst in the lower right abdomen? Judging by the distribution... I see...”

Analysis from my First Aid skill told me she needed a simple painkiller.

If the agony had been caused by bacteria, an infectious disease, or some sort of poisonous substance, then the skill should have suggested a medicine to treat the cause. There were no internal organ ruptures, either. First Aid would have suggested a position to close the wound otherwise.

“This is internal inflammation...probably appendicitis.”

Inquiring with the woman revealed she’d been nauseous and had been feeling pain since morning.

She’d collapsed not from sheer agony but because she’d passed out.

“I can treat appendicitis with a magic potion I have on hand,

but...”

An expensive curative would handle the inflammation, but it would likely return later.

It was fortunate we were nearby, but in a village this far from Zoltan, if the woman’s appendicitis struck again, it could easily turn fatal.

“For now, let’s get her inside.”

Ruti and I carried the ailing woman to a house, careful not to add any pressure on her abdomen.

“I suppose I should check, but is there anyone in the village who can perform a surgery?”

“Surgery?”

It took her a moment to grasp what I was asking.

“There’s an old man good at cutting off warts, but...”

“This isn’t really something to attempt with that little experience.”

I wasn’t a doctor, but I’d learned to remove arrowheads embedded in flesh and sew cut stomachs when I was a knight.

I had some anesthetic and hemostatics on hand, and Rit and Ruti knew healing magic.

We have what we need to conduct a surgery...

“My name is Red. What’s your name?”

“Kate...”

“Okay, Kate. I run an apothecary in Zoltan. Your appendix...one of the organs inside your stomach is hurt.”

“O-one of my organs?!” Kate paled. “A-a-am I going to die...?”

“No, it can be treated.”

“B-but my mom and my grandmother both collapsed from stomach pain and died... I always thought I would end up like that, too.”

Hmm, maybe a family disposition for appendicitis?

“I said it could be treated, didn’t I? There are two ways of dealing with it.”

“Two ways?”

“The first is using a Cure Sickness magic potion.”

“A magic potion?! Agh...”

When Kate heard that, she reflexively tried to sit up, but the pain stopped her.

“I don’t have the money to buy anything that expensive...”

A Cure Sickness potion went for six hundred payrils. It was a draught made using a magic that increased one’s natural recovery ability, but there were a lot of things it did not work on. Thus, it had a reputation for being both expensive and unreliable. However, it was highly effective on ailments not caused by open wounds or infections. When administered correctly by someone with the ability to diagnose

diseases, it was well worth the cost.

In my case, I could quintuple a vial using my multiplying potion, meaning the cost was effectively just one hundred twenty payrils.

That was still more than a villager living in a rural settlement would be able to shell out.

“Yes, the price is an issue. Additionally, if you use the potion to treat the condition, there’s a possibility it will return,” I explained.

“‘Return’... You mean I’ll end up collapsing from stomach pain again?!”

“Yes.”

Kate’s face darkened in despair.

“That’s one option. The other way doesn’t use an expensive magic potion, and there is no chance of the malady recurring.”

“Then that’s my only option! What other choice is there?”

“Undergo surgery to remove the organ that is causing the problem.”

“Remove...how?”

“After using an anesthetic to deaden the pain, I would use a sterile knife to cut open your stomach and excise your appendix. Then I would sew your stomach back up and cover it with a medicinal poultice. After letting it rest for a day, I would remove the threads and reapply the poultice. Then after another half a day of rest, you’d be able to move around again.”

Kate didn’t look any less frightened.

Going through an operation in a village that doesn’t even have a doctor certainly would sound frightening.

“Th-there’s no way. I’d die.”

“The procedure is to keep you from dying.”

Logic aside, it was impossible for someone to trust complete strangers with such a serious issue.

“For now, gather your family and discuss your options. You can decide after that.”

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Two hours later, Ruti, Rit, and I were assembled in Kate’s house.

“Swallow this pill with some water.”

I gave Kate the anesthetic.

“In ten minutes, once you are lying down, I’ll have you take one more. Everything will start to feel fuzzy. You can just close your eyes when that happens.”

After talking it through with her father and husband, Kate had elected to try the operation.

I’d worried they wouldn’t put their faith in an outsider.

Fortunately, this was a village that saw many vacationing nobles, so the general perception of outsiders was that they possessed a wealth of knowledge. That ended up working in my favor.

“Okay.”

Recognizing that the medicine was taking effect, I wiped down a small knife with alcohol.

“You know about medicine and actual doctor procedures. I learned how to stitch wounds as an adventurer, but I’d never be able to do something like this,” Rit commented. She was assisting me.

The knife I used was Rit’s—one she’d acquired from an ancient elf ruin in Loggervia. The blade made of an unknown metal was much sharper and sturdier than any steel one.

“Ha-ha, military doctors sort of run the gamut. We couldn’t bring the Bahamut Knights’ physician with us everywhere we went, so there were times we had to rely on medics from other squads... Thinking back on it now still makes me shiver.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“Well, there was one guy with a Monk blessing who could use healing magic four times a day, but that was all. He didn’t even know how to stop a wound from bleeding. And there was this awful Shaman who wouldn’t so much as administer first aid without a healthy dose of prayer. After a few incidents with people like them, the knights took their medical lectures seriously.”

“Ugh, that sounds rough.”

I moved beside Kate.

Okay, time to do this.

After double- and triple-checking that all of the tools I needed were gathered on the stand, I got to work.

“There’s a depth to keeping people alive that’s different from killing them.”

Something Danan said once surfaced in my mind. I’d fought countless times, so I understood how to cut skin. I knew where the internal organs were and how to run a blade through to slay a person.

And that experience was now being put to use in order to save this woman.

“Okay Rit, Ruti, I’ll be counting on you for backup.”

Reassured by their nods, I gently placed the knife against Kate’s stomach.

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“Thank you so much, Mr. Red!”

Kate’s family members all shook my hand.

Word of the apothecary who saved Kate spread to the rest of the

villagers, too.

I wasn't paid much in the way of money, but we did get lots of fresh vegetables, eggs, chicken, milk, apple cider, ale, and all sorts of local alcohol.

Also, they promised to bring us fresh-baked bread and freshly picked vegetables.

We wouldn't have any food issues while we were in the village, that was for sure.

"I always thought I'd die as my mother had... I'd given up, thinking that it was God's chosen path for me."

"That wasn't fate, just a disease that couldn't be healed the typical way."

If she'd been in Zoltan, it would have been taken care of without much issue. This wasn't a miracle brought on by some special Divine Blessing, just a malady removed with human hands.

"Umm, Mr. Red... Why would you go so far for someone you had never met before?" Kate asked. "I don't know how doctors are, but I can't imagine opening stomachs and cutting out a bad thing is easy..."

Hmmm... I'm not really sure how to answer that.

"I just happened to be passing by, and coincidentally knew how to treat you. That's all."

"You're a good guy... You can say it isn't fate, but I'm sure meeting you was God's will."

Kate and the rest of the villagers offered grateful prayers to Demis. Behind them, Ruti wore a troubled look.

I should pat her head later to soothe her.

"Okay then, I'll come by tomorrow to remove the stitches. If you feel anything strange, be sure to let us know. We'll be in the cottage."

The stroll had turned into quite the little adventure, but everything worked out.

By the time we were back in the cottage, I was ready for some rest.

"I'll handle the laundry," Rit volunteered, evidently worried about me overdoing it.

"Thanks, that helps. It's been a long time since I've done something like that. I guess I'm a little exhausted mentally."

"It's fine, just take it easy. You were super cool today!"

Rit took the clothes bloodied from the surgery over to the washing area.

She was a princess, but she knew how to do the wash quite well. Cleaning your own clothes was a crucial skill for an adventurer. Clothes got dirty from the many quests and fights.

Whether they were smug adventurers with showy techniques or fearsome, gruff-looking adventurers with big greatswords, they all

took up laundry boards and soap, then hunched over to scrub their garments clean at night.

During our journey, Danan, Theodora, and even Ares all washed their outfits. Behind every glorious adventure were many tiresome, everyday chores.

“I washed lots, too. I learned how to wash clothes well,” Ruti said.

“Yup. Your clothes were always clean on the road. Thanks, I’ll leave today’s laundry to you and Rit.”

Surprisingly, the old Hero’s party was a lot better at the wash than you might have expected.

“Big Brother.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Good job.” Ruti came over beside me while I sat in a chair, and she put her hand on my head. “There, there.” She patted my head.

“Thank you. But it’s hardly praiseworthy.”

I hadn’t done the surgery for free. I’d been given adequate payment. Receiving the poultry was nice, since it wasn’t available at the general store.

There wasn’t very much, however, so I’d have to use it carefully.

I could make a soup stock from the bones.

Making food for Ruti and Rit had become a hobby for me, so there were lots of things I wanted to try cooking, even on vacation.

In monetary terms, all the food and drink was cheap remuneration, but taking a bunch of payrials from a rural village was worth far less than enjoying our vacation.

Honestly, I hadn’t really committed some selfless act of heroism.

“You know, I only thought to go to such lengths because we had so much time on our hands. Ordinarily, I would’ve given some basic first aid and recommended she head to Zoltan for full treatment.”

“I meant what I said,” Ruti replied. “You relax and let me pat your head.”

There wasn’t anything for me to do, so I closed my eyes and let my sister have her way.

I really was tired.

Before I realized it, I’d fallen asleep.



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In my dream, I saw a young Ruti, her clothes covered in mud, getting scolded by our mom.

Ruti's blessing demanded she help anyone in need. Her dirty clothes were surely the result of being compelled to aid someone.

Knowing that, it seemed unfair to scold Ruti. I couldn't bear to watch.

I stood between them and defended my sister, saying that Ruti had done the right thing, so she shouldn't be punished. Eventually, Mom gave up. She left with a pained look on her face.

Mom knew as well as I did that Ruti hadn't gotten dirty just playing around. She chided Ruti because she didn't want her sacrificing herself to aid others. If Ruti continued down that path, she would grow to regret it.

To Mom, who possessed an utterly average blessing, that was something important to impart on her child.

Unfortunately, Ruti had the Divine Blessing of the Hero. She had to help people, even if it came at her own expense. It couldn't be helped. Over time, Mom wound up distancing herself from Ruti...

"Big Brother."

Ruti looked up at me. I relaxed my face and smiled as I patted her head.

"I'm sure it was hard. You did well."

"I'm the Hero, so it's no big deal."

"Maybe, but I'm still going to pet your head because I think you did something good. You don't have to worry. Just enjoy it."

"Okay..."

I patted her small head.

Ruti clenched the hem of her outfit, eyes cast down.

It was a nostalgic memory from our youth.

The little Ruti from back then was now complimenting me and petting my head.

I was pleased to see how she'd grown.

She really had become a wonderful young woman...

Hopefully, her life will continue to be filled with happiness.

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After removing Kate's stitches the next day, I picked up more food and returned to the cottage around noon.

“All right, time to make lunch.”

I’d already decided on the menu.

I grilled the poultry and vegetables I’d prepared beforehand and filled a pot with water.

Today’s lunch was a local dish eaten for generations in this village and supposedly originated in Durant’s hometown.

“Next, add this powder we were given and let it simmer, and introduce this other spice and some flour into the pot.”

The recipe calls for flour, so will it turn into a nice, thick kind of soup?

I added the amounts of spice and flour I had been told.

“That’s an amazing color.”

The soup had turned a nontranslucent brown.

“The smell is strong, too.”

I was starting to get a bit worried.

“Hmmm.”

Preparing an unfamiliar recipe was a little like an adventure.

There was no knowing what it would taste like when it was done, and I had no guarantee it would be pleasant. There was no telling if a dish had been made correctly until it was too late. It was sort of like the unease of sailing the ocean with a treasure map that might be fake.

“Hmm. Is this what they call curry?”

Rit and Ruti clung to me while peering into the pot.

“How unique.”

Ruti looked intrigued, and she stared at the simmering contents.

Our lunch for the day was indeed supposed to be curry.

“I wonder if it will turn out all right? I did make a chicken salad, just in case, but...”

“It’ll be fiiiine. Even if it isn’t delicious, we’ll still have the fun memory.”

“I guess, but...”

“Don’t worry about poison-testing. I can turn on my Hero immunities to make sure it’s edible.”

“To think the day would come when you would have to check my food for toxins...”

“You should have let me do it while we were traveling, Big Brother. You were always so stubborn.”

During our days as the Hero’s party, I never used any ingredients unless I was certain they were safe. Losing to the demon lord’s army because our combat abilities were hampered by bad food was unacceptable. So while we were traveling, I stuck to familiar recipes, ingredients, and seasonings to be safe.

“I can’t wait.” Ruti was clearly getting excited.

Thirty minutes later, the curry was complete at last.

“Hmm. Okay.”

I’d made a lot of different foods in my time, but this one was entirely new to me.

“A poison check and flavor test.” Ruti opened her mouth. “Ahhhh.”

“If it doesn’t taste good, please give it to me straight.”

I scooped up a little bit of curry on a spoon and blew to cool it before lifting it to Ruti’s mouth.

She gobbled it up.

“...How is it?”

“Spicy...but delicious.”

“I-I see. That’s a relief.”

I decided to try some, too.

The powder I’d been gifted was seemingly a mixture of chili pepper and black pepper. Undoubtedly, that’s where the heat came from. That spice mix wasn’t merely spicy, however. The medley of ground pepper created a distinct flavor.

“It feels like there are at least four other flavors.”

“Let me taste it!”

“Of course, help yourself.”

I started to pass Rit the spoon, but...

“Ahhh.”

...Rit opened her mouth expectantly.

“Be sure to blow on it first.”

“All right, all right.”

With a wry smile, I fed Rit how she wanted. On occasion, she really acted like a spoiled child.

“Hmmm... I like this flavor!”

Rit must have enjoyed the taste because she opened her mouth for another spoonful.

“Let’s eat the rest of it properly,” I said.

“Fiiine.”

“The weather is nice; how about taking this outside?”

“I second that idea!”

I set the chicken curry, the chicken salad I’d made beforehand, and some fresh, cool water from the well on the table in the yard.

We partook of the spicy brown curry while admiring the green mountains of spring.

“This curry goes with bread and pasta, right?”

“It can, yeah. We have bread for today.”

“I wonder how they taste together. Ohhh, it’s great!”

Rit started eating faster.

She really seemed to be a fan.

“In Durant’s homeland, they supposedly had curry with rice, too.

It's too bad we can't get any rice here."

"We won't be able to re-create Durant's style of curry until Zoltan imports some rice."

"I'd like to try it sometime," Rit said, and I was in total agreement.

"Apparently, curry is only made for celebrations in Sant Durant, but all the necessary ingredients are local. We could return here when we have some rice," I suggested.

"Hooray!"

"Yay."

Rit and Ruti both cheered.

A little settlement like this would never have been a stop during the Hero's journey.

But the time we spent in Sant Durant was joyous and filled with smiles, and the food was absolutely delicious.

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A buffet had been set up in a restaurant near the center of Zoltan to celebrate the arrival of Van the Hero, Cardinal Ljubo, and Escarlata the warrior who drove back the heavenly king of the water.

"To think the day would come that our humble Zoltan would host the Hero and a cardinal. And Escarlata, word of your brave deeds has reached even our distant home. We are truly honored to offer you this simple respite from your valiant quest."

With that toast, Mayor Tornado raised his glass. All of the Zoltan nobles around him raised theirs as well.

"Cheers."

There were clinks as everyone toasted joyously.

The Hero visiting Zoltan was an unthinkable event. As such, all the local aristocrats who dreamed of a glorious life in Central leaped at the chance to attend.

"Oh-ho-ho. After being sick on that awful boat, I'll be eating and drinking to my heart's content today." Cardinal Ljubo had a slovenly smirk on his large face as he grasped for all of the food and alcohol lined up before them.

"And after good food and drink, the next step is a fair woman... I'm sure the reputable noble I spoke with earlier will provide... Geh-heh-heh."

Prior to Van setting out from the Last Wall fortress, Ljubo had been abstinent. However, now that opportunities were presenting themselves, he was growing sloppier and looser.

How vulgar...

Esta could not stifle a wry chuckle at the undisciplined man.

Back when she had been Theodora, she would have been enraged, asking how Ljubo could call himself a member of the church...

I suppose a vulgar person is probably easier to deal with on the Hero's journey than a high-minded priest.

Esta's experience from traveling with Gideon and the others gave her a more flexible perspective.

Besides, there's a bigger problem.

Esta looked to a different person and sighed. The boy who was supposed to be the core of their party, Van the Hero, made no effort to hide his displeasure. He took an impolitic attitude with every noble who greeted him.

Unable to bear it, she called out to him. "Hey, Van."

"What is it, Esta?"

"Let's talk outside for a moment."

"Gladly! I was just thinking of heading out myself!"

Van's response was excited. Enough so that those around him heard.

Esta groaned as she put her finger to her forehead.

He should have learned basic etiquette at the monastery, yet his behavior was awful.

The two went to a terrace on the second floor, away from everyone else.

"Hahhhh... Listen, Van, I won't tell you to act like you are enjoying yourself, but would you please try to hide some of your displeasure?"

"Oh, it's the usual talk!"

Van's expression transformed immediately. Now he looked as though he was enjoying something.

"Do you really like my lectures that much?"

"Of course. As an inexperienced Hero, speaking to a Crusader with such a high blessing level is always worthwhile."

Sensing that he really did mean that and wasn't merely acting polite, Esta scowled.

She'd never convinced him to change his mind on anything. It had gotten to the point where she almost wondered whether it was even worth attempting to converse with the boy. More and more, she found herself struggling to comprehend him.

However, she hadn't called him out here for that.

"Van, these are the people who will help us carry the *Vendidad*. Try to be more considerate and respect their feelings."

"Respect?"

"Yes. They held this party today to celebrate your arrival. I'm not saying you have to go around wearing the phony smile of a Veronian noble, but try not to look so annoyed."

“Hmmm. Why are they holding a party for the Hero in the first place?”

“Why? What’s odd about people expressing their gratitude and admiration?”

“The Hero saves people because that’s what God has decided. It’s not something that requires appreciation, is it? This whole thing is a waste.”

“Perhaps it is to you, but other people see it differently. The Hero inspires people, giving them the courage to oppose evil.”

Esta didn’t expect Van to accept everything she was arguing, but the notion that the Hero inspired bravery aligned with the church’s interpretation. She hoped to convey her own ideas through that connection.

However, Van shook his head with a vacant look on his face.

“No, that’s wrong.”

“What? I’m sure you’ve read the church’s doctrine. It’s quite clear that one of the Hero’s responsibilities is to embolden the people to fight. There are times when the Hero must lead others into battle. It’s important to understand and respect what people feel and to take responsibility for whatever course of action you choose.”

“I’ve read the church’s interpretation of Divine Blessings. With the appearance of the Hero, people have a natural responsibility to bravely rise and fight together with God’s champion.” No emotion colored Van’s words. He spoke plainly and simply.

“Huh...?”

“The Hero’s advent means that others will have to fight alongside them and will die as a result. Such is Demis’s will, so it’s only natural they battle courageously. Similarly, it’s expected that they’ll perish as a result of that bravery. There’s no need for gratitude or admiration. All that’s necessary is faith in Demis. Nothing more ought to be involved.”

“...So you wouldn’t feel anything from sending people who fight for you to their deaths?”

“I wouldn’t. Martyrdom is a show of faith. Gratitude is impure.”

Esta felt keenly aware that there was a tremendous distance between herself and the boy she journeyed with.

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Two days later, in Sant Durant village...

“Good morning!”

...a local boy’s cheerful voice sounded from the entrance.

Opening the door, I saw the child standing there holding a basket filled with vegetables, eggs, and dried fish.

“Thank you.”

I gave the boy a copper coin for a tip and received the basket.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Red! I’ll be back tomorrow!”

Watching him turn and leave cheerfully felt refreshing. I made for the kitchen to put away the gifted groceries.

Today was looking to be another good day.

After finishing breakfast, Ruti, Rit, and I decided to take a stroll beyond the village until lunch.

We walked out toward the mountains, enjoying a trek through the spring fields.

Breezes came and went, carrying flowery scents through the air. Basking in the comfort of it all, I narrowed my eyes happily.

“This is a nice village,” Rit said, smiling.

“Yeah, it is.”

I grinned with her.

Ruti was crouched looking at a bee that had stopped on a blossom.

“So fluffy.”

She looked pleased to watch it fly off with pollen all over its body.

“They carry the pollen around for the stationary plants. Nectar and pollen are both food for bees, and bees are a crucial part of the flowers’ life cycle. The vegetables that grow here are all propagated by bees as well.”

“It’s amazing. The bees just work for their hives, yet they’re helping all the plants and us, too.”

Ruti stared at the bee as it left.

As the Hero, she’d been forced to live her life for others, so perhaps she glimpsed something special in the way the little insects lived.

“Form up!”

Suddenly, we heard a raised voice.

“One! Two! Three!”

Several others called back in unison.

That sounds like...training?

Pursuing the noises, we discovered a bunch of children gathered in a clearing. They were practicing with spears.

“Combat training, huh.”

The wilds beyond any village’s walls were home to both animals and monsters.

No powerful creatures prowled the woods out here, but for a settlement so far removed from Zoltan, the locals couldn’t count on anyone but themselves for help.

Sights like this one weren’t exceptionally uncommon. In fact, pretty much everyone living in this world learned how to fight to

develop their blessing. Every village child learned the basics of wielding a weapon.

Although in my case, I'd already gone off into the woods and killed a monster alone by the time I was old enough for combat practice, so I hadn't had much training.

"That's the Lotus School."

The oldest child was reading a training book for the fighting style that Yarandrala had written. In particular, the kid was reviewing how to use a pole like a spear.

By consulting that worn old book, the children were trying to teach themselves the basics of polearm combat.

"Ah! That boy from this morning is there!"

The child who brought us the ingredients had evidently joined in the training.

He was holding a plain spear just a little too large for someone his age and was rehearsing thrusts and overhead swings.

"How charming," Rit remarked as she observed.

Most of the kids looked less like they were swinging their spears and more like they were being swung around by their weapons. Still, there was a charming quality to their earnestness.

We sat down in the shade of a tree and took a break to watch the children practice for a while.

The swings we'd done together at the training camp recently started to feel almost nostalgic.

It wasn't that long ago, yet it almost felt like it had occurred in a different world now.

"Ninety-eight! Ninety-nine! One hundred!!!"

Finishing their one hundred reps, the children set their spears on the ground and sat down.

"So tired."

"My arms hurt."

They were messing around, pushing each other playfully. Exhaustion did little to dampen their spirits.

"Oh, it's Mr. Red!"

The boy noticed us sitting in the shade.

"Mr. Red? You mean the doctor who is from Zoltan?!"

Kids who looked tired moments before stood and rushed over.

They really are full of energy.

"Hello. I'm not a doctor. I'm an apothecary."

"Hello, Mister! But my dad said you were a great doctor from Zoltan!!!"

"My dad said so, too!"

"A famous doctor!"

The kids were all clamoring boisterously.

Their parents' words probably carried more sway than anything I said.

Behind me, Rit and Ruti were both laughing.

"Hey, don't you all need to keep practicing?"

"Ah, right!"

They hurriedly retrieved their spears, then made a point of coming back towards us to resume training.

They performed their well-rehearsed techniques as if they hoped to impress me.

They're too adorable...

"It would probably be a bit better if you held it like this."

"Mm!"

"Your pivot foot is shifting. You should pay a bit more attention to your center of balance."

"Like this?"

"You don't have to make your upswing so dramatic. A spear is long, so even with a smaller swing, it still has plenty of force behind it."

"Okay!"

Before we realized it, all three of us had joined in the training.

"You already have a good grasp of the basics, so you should probably study more about spear fighting to match your Gladiator blessing."

"Ehhh?! How did you know my blessing?!"

Seeing how amazed he was made me feel as though I'd performed a magic trick.

"Because I've studied a lot."

"Amazing! If I study in Zoltan, will I be able to do that, too?!"

"You might, if you work hard. But it would mean being separated from your mom and dad."

"Ah...I don't want that...maybe not, then!" The boy smiled, bashful. "Without me, there won't be enough people to take care of the fields."

He was a little shy, but the child had a solid grasp of things.

The calluses on his right hand weren't from combat practice; they'd formed from farming tools.

Undoubtedly, he helped with chores every day.

The Gladiator blessing had a rough period around level 10, but for those able to overcome that, it became a powerful blessing that granted strength sufficient to become a first-rate adventurer.

For those setting out to be heroes, the order they took in their skills was crucial. However, this boy wasn't aiming for the sort of life where he'd be constantly raising his level in battle.

“For skills, you can go one level in Weapon Proficiency: Spear, one in Critical Eye, and one in Parry. Then you might want to put three levels in Muscle Boost and Endurance Boost. After that, if you get Martial Art: Sword Impact, you shouldn’t ever have to worry too much about losing to monsters around Sant Durant.”

“Really?! Thanks! There wasn’t anyone in the village who could teach me about a Gladiator blessing!”

“Cool! Teach me, too!”

“Me too! Me too!”

“All right, all right. Everyone wait your turn.”

“Yeah!”

The other children had Warrior, Soldier, Mage, and Monk blessings.

A few of the kids hadn’t discovered their Divine Blessings yet. For them, I just went over the basics of what sorts of skills to take.

“You’re amazing, Mr. Red!”

It was kind of fun teaching children every once in a while.

Rit and Ruti looked to be enjoying kids who were so open and expressive.

After a while...

“Oy!”

...someone called for the children.

The man who’d been on guard at Sant Durant’s gate was approaching.

“Word is ogrekin were spotted outside the village. Just to be safe, head on back home!”

“Ogrekin?!”

The kids were shocked.

“Come on now, don’t cause a fuss. Just head on back now!”

“Fiiiiinne! Thank you for teaching us, Mr. Red!”

“See you, Mr. Red!”

“Bye bye!”

The children all bade cheery farewells while hurrying toward the village.

“Ha-ha, looks like they’ve taken a liking to you,” the guardsman remarked.

“We stumbled on their training, and one thing led to another... It turned out to be pretty fun,” I replied.

“Looking after kids can be a fun change of pace.”

“Not so much if you’re doing it every day, though?”

“My son’s turning five this year, and he’s a little ball of energy. I can’t keep up with him so well anymore,” the man answered with a smile.

It was clear from his smile that he loved his child from the bottom

of his heart.

“So... What’s this about ogrekin?”

“Ah, right. Ginny the logger mentioned spotting them. She’s the sort of person who would mistake a withered bush for a goblin, but it’s best to be safe.”

Ogrekin were a smaller subspecies of ogres, normally no taller than two meters. They were physically stronger than people but possessed low intelligence and didn’t use weapons or tools.

Supposedly, they were the result of ogres intermixing with humans, but there was no record of a child being born to such a union. Their name was simply derived from their resemblance to proper ogres, and even if they had no connection to humans, it was still a commonly accepted theory that they were closely related to ogres.

“Do ogrekin show up around here often?”

“Every once in a while. Ordinarily it’s fine, and they don’t pass that close to the village, but it is dangerous to go out walking in a small group. Six years ago, a family in a house on the outskirts of Sant Durant was eaten.”

“That’s scary.”

“It’s probably best you head back to your cottage. The young men of the village will go out on patrol.”

Ogrekin weren’t particularly strong creatures, weak enough that a C-rank party from Zoltan could handle them.

And were this Zoltan, I’d take it easy and entrust the problem to someone else. However...Sant Durant’s militia was not made up of warriors by trade; they were volunteering farmers.

“Maybe I should investigate things?”

“What? N-no, we couldn’t ask that of a visitor...”

“It’ll just be for today. If I don’t find anything, then I’ll leave the rest to you all. It’ll be a nice way to explore around a bit outside Sant Durant.”

“Explore around? You heard me say there were ogrekin skulking about, right?”

“Despite how I look, I’ve seen a fair bit of action.”

“Hmmm.”

No need to look so dubious.

“It’s okay.” Ruti raised her hand and stepped in front of me. She was holding a slender stick in her hand. “Watch this.”

“O-okay?”

Ruti took a breath and then swung the branch down forcefully.

“Huh?” The guy didn’t seem to understand the point to the gesture initially. Behind him, there was a loud bang. He spun around wildly. “Wh-what was that?!”

A large tree had been split in half, the two pieces falling apart.

Ruti had loosed a vacuum slice, wielding the branch like a sword.

Some fighters could achieve similar results with a proper blade, but my little sister was likely the only person in the world who could pull it off with a blunt bit of wood.

“We’re pretty strong.”

“I-I see...”

The man gulped and repeatedly nodded in acknowledgment of Ruti’s display.

Chapter 3

Everything for Divine Blessings

The three of us returned to the cottage first for a simple lunch. That done, we changed into traveling attire before departing the village.

Sant Durant's wall at our backs, we ventured into unpathed forest—a bit of a tough walk.

There was a bit of technique to moving over terrain hindered by vines, tree roots, and rotten leaves.

"After taking it easy for a while, a more challenging walk is kind of fun. It really gives things a sense of adventure."

Rit's Spirit Scout blessing was well-suited to an environment like this, so she stood at the lead, searching for signs of the oGREkin.

"There's still no sign of them," she remarked.

"Maybe that logger really was imagining things... Sorry, I might have gotten us involved in nothing."

"It's fine, it's fine. A mistake would be preferable to actual monsters." Rit's voice was chipper.

Ruti nodded. "She's right. Plus, it's fun to go on a hike with you." She ducked to avoid a spiderweb. "Such a big web for such a little spider."

Back in the day when we were still on the Hero's journey, she would have brushed such a thing aside without consideration. These days, Ruti seemed to carry an interest for all the creatures living in the wild.

It was as if she was making up for all the time that the world had been dull and gray to her while she was forced to save it. Now everything was bright.

Rit suddenly came to a halt.

"Red."

"Hm? Did you find something?" I moved up beside her.

"Look at this."

"Hmm. Tracks... Looks like Ginny didn't imagine things."

"Mhm. They're definitely oGREkin footprints, but..." Consternation was plain on Rit's face as she continued. "It's clear they were trying to disguise their tracks."

“You’re right. They’re trying to erase evidence of their presence.”

That meant they were moving while attempting to remain unnoticed.

Adventurers did it all the time. Particularly when spying on a monster nest.

“Normal ogrekin don’t do anything like that, though.”

“True. It’s hard to imagine creatures that wouldn’t think to swing a stick erasing their tracks.”

We’d been right to look into this.

“Maybe we should start investigating a bit more seriously,” I suggested.

“Roger!”

“Mhm.”

Time to get serious.

We picked up our speed and did a quick survey of the land surrounding the village. Doing so revealed evidence of disguised ogrekin footprints that spanned a broad area. That ruled out any chance of this being a single unusual ogrekin with a habit of erasing its tracks.

“Based on the number of prints, I’d guess there’s around thirty of them.”

Things were a lot more serious than first believed.

Ordinarily, ogrekin struck immediately if they wanted to attack a settlement. They didn’t spare a thought for what kind of resistance they’d meet. Yet these ones were taking careful observations, and of such a small village.

These aren’t normal ogrekin.

We headed back to Sant Durant.

“Mr. Red!”

Armed and armored villagers were waiting for us. Since they couldn’t rely on Zoltan’s protection, they’d developed a healthy sense for impending danger.

“The situation’s changed. It would be best to gather everyone in the village and have them take shelter together.”

“What?!”

The people looked to one another, confusion plain on their faces.

It wasn’t going to be easy to convince them just how dangerous the predicament was, as Sant Durant had known peace for so long. Their confusion and disbelief were to be expected.

Now then, how should I explain things to get them to understand...?

However, my concerns turned out to be unnecessary.

“Got it. We’ll gather everyone and get them to safety. There’s no house large enough for the whole village, so we will have to break up the people among the homes around the main plaza. Will that be all

right?"

"That should be fine. Those buildings are close enough for someone to shout if there's an issue. And if something happens to one home, those in the others should recognize it soon enough."

"All right, everyone, let's get the word out!"

""""Okay!""""

The villagers were set to the task quickly.

The evacuation and sheltering proceeded apace, and the owners of the houses that would be the shelters quickly agreed to cooperate.

Even in the old days, when we fought the demon lord's army and had the Hero's reputation at our disposal, getting everyone to trust us swiftly enough to prevent any damage was difficult.

Hopefully, this would mean things could be resolved without any injuries or deaths. I explained the situation to the villagers and put together a plan to protect Sant Durant.

"I think it will be all right, but you should prepare yourselves to lose some livestock and crops. We'll prioritize protecting citizens above everything else."

"We understand. The most important thing is that everyone survives."

"Rit and I will search for the ogrekin lair and put them down. My sister will remain in the village to handle defense, so you've got nothing to worry about."

"That girl who cut a tree with a twig? That's reassuring. Thank you... Please be careful."

"We'll be all right. Leave it to us," I answered reassuringly.

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Rit and I departed Sant Durant again at close to four in the afternoon.

The sky had abruptly grown cloudy, and it started to rain.

"Weather really changes quickly out in the mountains."

"At least it's not still winter."

Rit and I both pulled up our coat hoods.

"Over here." Rit was following more tracks. Thanks to her, we were able to move through the forest without losing the trail.

"They're pretty good at hiding their path. If this weren't a forest, I might have lost them."

"These ogrekin are that capable? We really can't afford to get careless, then."

Ordinary ogrekin wouldn't have posed a threat, but monsters had blessings like any other living creatures, and they could grow strong by killing.

It was incredibly rare for a monster to be born with a powerful

blessing, but there were a few known exceptions.

I once slayed a rampaging frost troll with a Weapon Master blessing. It had wielded a sword in its mouth.

"I'd like to finish this quick, since Van the Hero's nearby. If we don't solve this soon, word will reach Zoltan, and Van might be compelled by his Divine Blessing to come help."

"That would be bad. We'll have to make sure we end this now."

Rit touched the hilt of one of the shotels at her waist. Her trusty swords were decorated with griffon feathers. They weren't ancient, legendary magic weapons that had rested in some forgotten crypt but the product of Loggervian craftsmanship.

No matter what enemy we faced, I knew I could count on Rit to watch my back.

"Over here."

"Got it."

We pressed deeper into the forest, Rit leading the way.

"You know," Rit muttered as she focused on the ground where she was walking. "I was surprised how cooperative the villagers were."

"Me too. I'm glad they decided to trust us and take shelter. Protecting a settlement of scattered people would have been challenging, even for Ruti. She'd never lose, of course, but she can't be in two places at once. Had there been two attacks on opposite ends of Sant Durant, someone would've been injured."

Ruti was the strongest person in the world, but she was only one girl.

It took courage to immediately leave your home and fields to take shelter. The people of Sant Durant were brave.

"It's all because you saved Kate." Rit smiled. "It might have been random chance, but that operation won them all over. And because they trust you, we can solve this ogrekin issue without any casualties. Your sword and mine may be what slay the monster, but it's Red the apothecary's kindness that truly rescued the village."

Rit sounded happy. She was so glad that I had the confidence of Sant Durant, it nearly seemed as though she thought it was her, not me.

Regardless, I was happy to see her so pleased.

I'd long since quit the life of a knight, but at the very least, I wanted to be a man Rit could be proud of.

We stopped talking and focused on tracking. After a while, the wind's direction changed.

"I see."

It had to do with the lay of the land.

The breeze didn't flow toward the village in this part of the woods. It hid the stench that accompanied ogrekin.

“We’re close.”

“Yeah.”

Rit and I drew our swords and kept on guard.

“Using a place like this to hide...they’re pretty smart.”

“This is feeling less and less like ogrekin. Maybe they’re different monsters that came down from the Wall at the End of the World.”

Rit’s expression transformed, and she became Rit the hero again. It was yet another absolutely stunning side to her.

“Heh-heh. I like how you look while taking it easy on vacation, but I also enjoy how cool you look right before a fight.”

“I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

We both sensed something ahead and went silent, switching to hand signals for communication.

Peering through the trees, I spotted a bunch of ogrekin hiding from the rain under the forest canopy.

It looks like there are two different kinds.

One part of the group was composed of standard ogrekin, the sort found in the mountains around Zoltan.

The others appeared no different save that they had larger heads and right arms.

Some sort of mutation, maybe?

I did my best to discern their blessings, but...

“...I don’t know.”

Perhaps because they were aberrant, I couldn’t determine blessings from their movements. Initially, they seemed like Soldiers, but I noticed aspects of Sorcerer and Adept blessings as well.

This was the first time I’d ever seen such a thing, and it gave me a creepy feeling. Still, there was nothing for it but to fight while staying wary.

Okay...

I gave Rit the signal and immediately leaped out.

Using Lightning Speed, I got a quick slash in on one of the mutant ogrekin.

“Guou?!”

Its giant body collapsed.

“Guess they still go down without too much trouble.”

Its reaction speed and endurance evidently weren’t good enough to deal with my first strike.

“Guoooooooo!!!” one ogrekin roared, and there was a clear divide in their reactions.

The ordinary ones fell into a panic at the sudden attack, flailing both arms as they charged at me.

“These ones are textbook!”

Rit jumped out after me, slashing at the monsters’ backs.

That sent the creatures into further disarray, and a few ran into each other.

However...

"Looks like those strange ones are going to be a problem."

The mutant ogrekin had distanced themselves from Rit and me and formed a simple line, observing warily.

Their behavior was unlike any ogrekin I'd ever encountered.

"They're holding weapons!" Rit shouted.

Indeed, the mutants held metallic shapes in their overdeveloped right arms. The objects shone peculiarly.

"Those are clockwork parts from ancient elf ruins!"

"They went into an ancient elf ruin?!"

The mutants were wielding clockwork parts from those that guarded those ancient structures as clubs.

"Be careful, Rit!"

"Yeah! I've got a bad feeling about those things."

Cautious or not, there was no telling what the mutants might do if we kept waiting.

I raised my bronze sword and dashed forward. One of the abnormal ogrekin brought its massive right arm down.

"Grahhhhh!"

"What?!"

The attack was aimed at my sword instead of my head. Surprised, I lowered my weapon and dodged, slashing the inside of the monster's thigh before moving away.

"Giiiiii!!!"

The mutant howled in rage at the pain, but it did not pursue me rashly. Instead, it watched for an opening.

Simple though the attack was, the ogrekin had tried to separate me from my weapon. That was a tactic born of thought, not mindless violence.

"Red!" Rit called. The mutant right in front of me formed a seal with its left hand.

"Magic!"

Before I could stop it, two ordinary ogrekin attacked me from the right and left. It only took a moment to slay them, but that was enough for the mutant to complete its spell.

"Sleep!"

A monster that should not have been capable of understanding human speech spoke the magic's name, and the spell surrounded me with light.

The mutant's face twisted into a smile. However, I didn't pass out, instead splitting the creature's large head in two.

"Their spells seem to be of average strength—not enough to be a

threat to either of us.”

The spell and fighting tactics both came as a surprise, but neither was especially powerful. Still, the might of each technique felt disparate when compared to the mutants’ overall power.

I’d never felt this way about an enemy before.

“...I’ll save the observations for later. They’re strange, but they’re hardly invincible! Follow my lead, Rit!”

“Got it!”

Rit and I worked in combination, felling our opponents one after another.

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“Gugyahhhhhh!!!”

The ogrekin’s arm quivered as it loosed Martial Art: Multi-Slash.

This fundamental technique added a second attack after a slight pause following the first. It was both powerful and versatile. However, the ogrekin mutant’s weapon was a poor fit for the ability. A hunk of gears not intentionally designed to be a weapon couldn’t make full use of the Martial Art’s attack speed.

The ogrekin’s consecutive swipes were little more than a vague waving motion. I deflected the pair of blows and ran my sword through the monster’s neck.

“Ghhck!!”

When I pulled my blade free, blood came pouring out.

The ogrekin dropped its weapon, and, clutching at its throat in vain, it collapsed.

“Hahhh, that’s all of them.”

“Good work.”

It wasn’t a particularly difficult fight, but they were creepy opponents to deal with.

The source of that unease stemmed from the mutants’ identical blessings. It resembled how Divine Blessings were uniform across a single species of demon.

Rit didn’t stow her swords, keeping them ready while scanning to make sure none of the ogrekin were playing dead. Meanwhile, I investigated the body of the last mutant ogrekin I killed.

“This really is from the ancient elf ruins in the mountains.”

I picked up the monster’s improvised weapon. It was a heavy makeshift club, not something a normal person would be able to handle.



“Did they go into the ancient elf ruins? Ruti broke the elevator, so normal monsters shouldn’t have been able to enter. Maybe there was another entrance?”

I hadn’t gone to the site since everything that happened with Ares.
Perhaps I should investigate when I have the time.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

The dead mutant had a mark on its neck resembling a tattoo. However, it hadn’t been made with normal ink but, rather, an unknown substance.

“Is this ancient elf script?”

There were two lines of characters.

I couldn’t understand all of it, but the symbols looked familiar.

“Red! All of the other mutants have the same thing on their necks, too!”

“All of them? Hmm. I know I’ve seen this before, but where?”

“I feel like I’ve read the first line somewhere as well...”

“You too?”

“I never really studied the ancient elf language, so I don’t think it was in a book.”

“Hmmm...”

Rit and I stared at the text, cocking our heads as we tried to remember.

“No luck. For now, let’s make a copy on a piece of paper and head back to the village. I doubt there was a second ogrekin group that attacked Sant Durant, but we should remain alert tonight to be safe. Although, if there are any left, they’ll probably run after seeing what became of their comrades.”

“Hmmm, where have I seen this before?”

Rit knit her brow, still hoping to recall why she was familiar with part of the marking.

Why did this happen while Van the Hero is in Zoltan?

It was probably just a coincidence, but I couldn’t help but feel like it was something more sinister.

“Demis,” I muttered.

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After returning to the village, we stayed on lookout until daybreak, but there was no further trouble.

It was probably safe to say that the ogrekin menace had passed.

“Thank you all so much!”

After I accepted the villagers’ gratitude, they decided to hold a banquet for us in two days to celebrate.

“You didn’t just save Kate’s life; you even saved all of Sant Durant from danger! The village owes all of you a great debt!” After the old woman who was the village elder said as much, many locals came by to offer their appreciation.

“There’s not much a small settlement like ours has to offer, but if there is anything you might need during your stay, please let us know.”

“I’m grateful, but we’ve already received so much, so we’re fine.”

Lots of people had given us something made in their own home as thanks. Food, spices, alcohol, oil, candles, soap, all sorts of accessories, clothes, hemp rope, a salve for stiff shoulders, a backscratcher, notes from children...

The small storage space in the cottage was liable to burst soon.

Finally, we managed to get away from the crowd.

“We’re back!” Rit said as she stepped through the cottage’s front door.

“We’re back,” Ruti echoed as she did the same.

What had started as a little stroll had turned into quite a big outing.

“Mmmh. It was fun,” Rit remarked as she stretched.

I’m glad she thought so, at least.

“I think it’s time for a bath! We went for a walk, trained with the kids, explored the woods, fought a bunch of ogrekin, and stood guard until morning without sleeping... I’m all sticky with sweat!”

“Yeah, I guess we did get a bit dirty. It was a good choice to change into outdoor clothes.”

Ordinary ogrekin were simple enough to beat without getting any blood on our garments, but the mutants had proved to be trickier. Rit and I both ended up with a fair bit of crimson staining our attire.

I want to wash up as soon as possible.

“There’s no water system here like in Zoltan, so we’ll have to gather it from the well first.”

Nobles typically patronized these cottages, and they brought a servant to fetch water for them. Warming the bath also required maintaining heat in the boiler outside by keeping it stocked with firewood.

All of that was too much work, so we hadn’t used the bath since arriving. Today, however, I really felt like taking a proper soak.

“Guess that means I’ve got one more job to handle. I’ll get the bath ready, so you two take it easy.”

I started to head for the well, but Ruti grabbed my sleeve.

“No can do. You worked really hard. Relax today.”

“Eh? You know I have Immunity to Fatigue from mastery of the Endurance skill. Sure, I don’t like feeling this dirty and my head is a

little foggy from being up all night, but none of us are feeling at our best right now, and someone's got to do this."

"You being tired isn't the point."

Ruti had a serious look on her face. She stared me in the eyes as she continued. "You worked hard, so I want to take care of you." Tugging on my sleeve, she added, "Rest, Big Brother."

"...Okay. I appreciate it, Ruti."

"Mhm. Thanks for everything you did."

Ruti smiled and squeezed one of my hands in both of hers.

"You're always cool, Big Brother."

With that, Ruti left to handle bath preparations.

"You look pleased, Red." Rit was grinning.

"Of course I am. I'm a happy guy, having such a kind little sister."

"Heh-heh. Now that she's free from the Hero, Ruti has become a really nice girl. It's a little ironic, but she feels a lot more like how I'd expect the Hero to be now that she isn't being forced into it by Demis."

"Yeah. Her Divine Blessing pushed her to do all that stuff before, never leaving room for her personal decisions. Courage and kindness don't come from a blessing. They're born from the heart."

Ruti was becoming more charming by the day.

Seeing how she grew over time was a joy. It constantly reminded me how glad I was that she was finally free from the Hero.

"Now then, we should get changed while Ruti's preparing the bath."

"True, lounging around the cottage with bloody clothes will make cleaning up a hassle."

I grimaced when I looked at my dirty outfit.

That I got so filthy was indication that I needed more training.

"Wait, Rit! Why are you stripping?!"

Upon looking up, I saw Rit removing her attire and getting down to her underwear.

"I mean, what part of getting changed did you not understand? You hurry up and strip, too."

"Fine, but I could've used a moment to prepare my heart...!"

"Shouldn't you be used to it by now?" Rit laughed, but her face flushed. "Hurry up. I'm going to soak our clothes in the laundry bucket. You getting embarrassed is making me feel embarrassed, too!" Rit put her hands on her hips as she spoke, now standing in only her underwear.

Her breasts really are big...

"Or would you prefer I take off your clothes for you?" Rit probably imagined that sounding a lot more seductive, but she was so embarrassed that it didn't come out quite right... It was still cute,

though.

Seeing her like that helped me collect myself.

"It's okay. I'll take them off now."

I stripped down to my underwear as well.

"Rit..."

She was covering her eyes with both hands. "I need a moment to ready my heart."

"You're the one who told me to do this."

This was what made her so adorable.

I couldn't keep from laughing.

At first, she scolded me for it, but she quickly burst into giggles, too.

Laughing together drove home that the fighting was done and we were back to our slow life.

I was glad to have Rit and Ruti in my life.

"Ha-ha. I'll go take care of the laundry."

Once the laughter died down, we were finally ready to take care of our clothes.

The wash bucket is beside the well, if I remember right.

I picked up the clothes on the floor, and a piece of paper fell out.

"Ah, I almost forgot."

"What?"

"The copy I made of those two lines on the necks of those ogrekin."

"Oh yeah, that text that was so familiar!"

Wearing only undergarments, Rit sidled up to me and peered at the copy. Although we slept in the same bed in Zoltan, it still made my heart skip a beat.

"Yeah, I've definitely seen it before." Rit sounded frustrated.

"You only remember the first line, and both of them look familiar to me..." I said.

"Hmmm."

We both racked our brains as we headed for the well.

Maybe we should ask Ruti?

"Hey, Ruti, can I ask you something?"

"What is it, Big Brother?"

My little sister was fetching water from the well...clad only in underwear.

She was working the rope and leaning over in such a way that her butt stuck out. The pose was a bit problematic with her so exposed.

"Ummm..."

"I knew it. I had a feeling you'd take your clothes off." The corners of Ruti's mouth quirked up slightly—her signature, suggestive smile.

"I filled the laundry bucket, so all you need to do is let your clothes soak."

"O-oh... Good job, Ruti. That's my little sister for you."

"Heh-heh."

Feeling a bit dumbfounded, Rit and I dropped our outfits into the pail.

Ruti had folded up her attire beside the bucket beforehand, so I added it in, too.

Her clothes have a nice feel.

"So, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Ah, it's about this." I handed Ruti the memo. "There was ancient elf script on the the necks of those ogrekin, and it looked familiar. Do you recognize any of it?"

Ruti nodded. "Mhm. I've seen the first line before. I remember everything with you. It matches the ancient elf writing engraved in the gem beast we fought at the Wall at the End of the World."

"The gem beast! That's it!"

The fearsome, giant turtle-like monster that absorbed magic. That fearsome being created by the ancient elves that went against the world's fundamental logic and possessed multiple blessings. Even Ruti had struggled against such a powerful enemy.

The etching on its shell matched the first line of the transcribed tattoo.

Rit looked shocked. "What does that mean? Is there some connection between those mutant ogrekin and the gem beast?"

"...There's certainly a reason to think that. I couldn't tell what blessing those ogrekin had, but if they had several like the gem beast, that would explain it."

That weird feeling that they were Soldiers, Sorcerers, and Adepts all at once.

Multiple blessings gave reason to why they moved like low-level creatures yet possessed power above that station.

"Their possessing three Divine Blessings makes it all clear."

"Why were the ancient elves making monsters like ogrekin?" Rit wondered.

"This is all just a theory, but..."

I paused for a moment and accessed my Guide blessing. My level was very high, so I couldn't hope to increase it fighting the weak enemies around Zoltan.

"For how easily those ogrekin went down, I can feel that my blessing has grown a little. Most likely, defeating one of those ogrekin advanced your blessing by the equivalent of three normal ones."

"And you think that's why the ancient elves made them?"

"Yeah. They might have been fodder to strengthen Divine

Blessings.”

Ogrekin were said to be the descendants of offspring born of humans and ogres. But ogres and humans couldn't produce children together. At least, not under normal circumstances.

“At this point, I'm just speculating, but... Ogrekin as a species could have originated through some unknown technology for the express purpose of enhancing blessings.”

“There are a lot of mysteries surrounding the ancient elves, but if so, they sound pretty terrible,” Rit commented.

“Well... There are a lot of nasty traps in ancient elven ruins, after all.”

“True!”

Rit nodded aggressively. Evidently, she'd had a few harrowing experiences in ancient elven structures herself.

Her gestures were adorable, and I couldn't help but crack a grin.

Suddenly, the last piece fell into place, and I remembered. “Right, the ancient elven ruins!”

“Wh-what are you shouting for?”

“The second line! I recall where I've seen it!” Talking about the ruins had jogged my memory. “This was written inside the structure below that mountain.”

“The place I investigated,” Ruti stated, sounding intrigued.

I'd seen the second line in the same complex where we'd fought Shisandan during the False Prophet incident.

“Hero Administration Bureau,” I said.

“Hero Administration Bureau?” Rit parroted.

“There was a wood elf clay sign beside these markings, and it read
HERO ADMINISTRATION BUREAU.”

“An organization that manages the Hero...?” Ruti looked perplexed.

She knew better than anyone just how extreme the Hero's strength was and how harsh its impulses were. It had to be difficult to exert any amount of control over that blessing.

Those ogrekin were probably monsters created for that organization.

Honestly, this revelation gave us a lot to think about, but...

“Ahh. I feel better now.”

...Grinning, I decided to switch gears.

“Not being able to remember was so annoying. Now I can finally relax with a nice bath.”

“...You're right. A soak is more important for now.”

There was no point dwelling on it all anymore.

We were on vacation until Van left Zoltan.

There would always be time to investigate and satisfy our

curiosity once things had calmed down. Worrying was a waste.

“This should be enough water. I’ll get the bath heated quickly, so wait a moment.”

Rinsing off and getting clean are more important.

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After getting out of the bath, I cooked some eggs for quick and simple sandwiches.

I made black tea to drink using some leaves I’d brought from Zoltan.

After staying up all night, I thought a nap sounded nice and suggested as much for when we were done eating.

“Nice idea. Maybe we should all rest lined up together,” Rit replied.

“With Big Brother in the middle,” Ruti added.

The bath had left us all warm and comfortable.

I bet some rest would really hit the spot right now.

“You know, you hardly ever slept while we were fighting the demon lord’s army.” Rit looked pleased. “I remember you fighting for three straight days, only to sleep for three hours at most. Then you’d wake up and be fine to march on to the next destination. It was kind of amazing, but I was always a little worried you’d collapse from the stress of it.”

“I can remember plenty of occasions when you threw a blanket over me and ordered that I get more rest.”

“Ugh... That’s embarrassing to remember. Sorry. It was tough to be honest about my feelings back then.”

“I could tell you were worried about me. Thanks.”

“Ugh... Eh-heh-heh...” Rit blushed and smirked.

Ruti’s head suddenly perked up. “Mister Crawly Wawly is here.” My sister stood and opened the window. And no sooner had she done so than a spider seated upon a pigeon came gliding into the cottage.

“Welcome back, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

The spider raised his front leg in greeting.

“It’s a message from Tisse.” Ruti took the memo tied to Mister Crawly Wawly’s leg and handed it to me.

Has something happened? I quickly scanned the contents of the missive.

“Hmm, it seems Van has successfully carried the *Vendidad* out to sea.”

“They actually carried that gigantic ship? Wow!” Rit exclaimed.

I’d understood how it could be accomplished in theory using a Behemoth Ring and enough elixirs, but it was still a surprise to learn it

had been accomplished.

“It’s almost difficult to accept that they managed it,” I said.

Ruti nodded, seemingly impressed. “Mhm. That’s amazing. Even I couldn’t carry it.”

“This means our vacation is nearly over, right? If they have the *Vendidad*, there’s not much reason for them to hang around in Zoltan.” Rit looked a little bit disappointed.

“No, apparently not,” I corrected.

“Eh?”

“According to Tisse, the Hero’s party plans to slay the hill giant Dundach before they leave.”

Rit’s eyes went wide in confusion. “Why?”

Dundach was a monster occupying a portion of Zoltan territory together with some other hill giants.

A grant of title and lordship over the territory occupied by the giants had been offered to anyone who could defeat them, but the bounty had gone unclaimed all this time.

That was due in part to Dundach being too strong for most of Zoltan’s adventurers. Plus, after scaring off those who lived in the region before them, the giants hadn’t caused any further trouble, preferring to keep to themselves and use the stolen castle as a base.

Considering the usual Zoltan laziness, no further incidents meant no great urgency to reclaim the keep.

The castle was pretty far from Zoltan proper, and the area controlled by the giants was a wasteland with no one to rule. Most people saw little point in becoming ruler of a place like that.

“Why would a Hero passing through take a detour to defeat some unimportant monsters out in the middle of nowhere?” Rit asked.

“The Hero can’t abandon people in need...but Zoltan’s hardly in danger.” Even the former Hero puzzled over it.

We’d slain the ogrekin because of an unusual development—a new type of monster. A change like that could upset the established order and cause significant damage.

It was a skilled adventurer’s duty when investigating to observe such events and nip them in the bud before any harm came of them. However, Dundach hadn’t rocked the boat much, at least not from what I’d heard. I couldn’t understand the reason for going after the giant.

“Does Tisse’s message give any explanation?”

“No, but it mentions that she’s accompanying the Hero’s party as a guide.”

“She is?!”

That was a rather bold thing for her to do.

As she was Zoltan’s top adventurer, perhaps it was expected that

she'd be chosen to assist the Hero and his companions.

Escarlata was the only one in Van's group who'd recognize Tisse. A cardinal should've had no reason to associate with a hired killer in the past.

"Bold, but effective. Way to go, Tisse." Ruti must have been impressed, for she complimented her best friend's decision to tag along. "...I'm worried about her, though."

"Yeah, there's no telling what sort of person Van is," I agreed. "And traveling with the Hero is always dangerous."

Should Van come to view Tisse as an enemy...

That girl was one of the strongest people in the world, but her chances of escaping a Hero with overwhelming strength like Ruti's were slim.

It was troubling.

"If we get involved, her risk will be for nothing. Standing idly by isn't a great feeling, but all we can do is wait," I said.

Ruti looked frustrated but nodded. "I know." Turning to the spider who'd delivered the message, she looked him right in the eyes. "Mister Crawly Wawly, if Tisse is ever in danger, come find me. I don't care whether she's up against the church or the Hero. I won't allow anyone to hurt my best friend."

Mister Crawly Wawly hopped happily in response to Ruti's declaration.

Chapter 4

Goodwill and Malice

My name is Tisse Garland.

I'm an assassin with the Assassins Guild with the Divine Blessing of the Assassin, and at the moment, I am an adventurer guiding Van the Hero.

I'm also an average, everyday inhabitant of this world and shuddering internally at how extreme this boy's thoughts are.

Presently, I'm in the castle that the hill giant Dundach has claimed, in a region far removed from Zoltan proper.

Hill giants are the most common of all the giant species, and the ones that interact with people most often. As the name suggests, they tend to live around larger hills and smaller mountains, but they can appear anywhere with a sufficiently warm climate and enough food to sustain them.

In other words, places well suited to humans were also well suited for hill giants.

This has led to frequent skirmishes between the two sides. Hill giants were the classic staple of all old cliché stories of village heroes slaying monsters.

"Hill giants possess only slightly weaker intelligence than humans, and if there's one with a Blacksmith or Armorsmith blessing among them, they'll have weapons and armor. Their size and arm strength are about what you'd expect, and when it comes to reproductive capabilities, they propagate at about the same rate as humans. Although, talking about it that way for people is a bit off."

Ljubo had a lecturer's demeanor that befitted a cleric as he explained hill giants to Van.

"Hill giant assaults never last long. In the end, humans have always emerged victorious. Do you know why that is, Van?"

"Yes, sir! Because that is how Almighty Demis wills it!"

"That's correct. Hill giants are not given blessings befitting heroes and champions. Ultimately, they always fall to us."

"Because most giants of any kind have only Warrior blessings!"

"Indeed. The fact that the Warrior blessing, which can do nothing

but buff physical abilities, is the most common in this world can be said to be God's revelation of our world's ways."

"Right. Warrior does not possess a great role for itself, but it is the blessing that provides meaning to all others. There is no value in people with Warrior blessings, but those blessings hold a great meaning in a religious sense."

"Mhm. Why has Almighty Demis given the name Warrior to the Divine Blessing representative of the average person? It is an expression of the desire that every being in this world fight to develop their blessings. Remember, no matter how much an opponent might surpass us in physical might, that strength is as nothing before the Divine Blessings afforded to us by God."

Van nodded over and over at Ljubo's words.

I led the party as a guide, and my eyes were glazing over a bit while I listened to the pair behind me, though it didn't show on my face.

My irreplaceable partner, Mister Crawly Wawly, had the Warrior blessing. I could not begin to express how crucial he was to my life. He sat on my shoulder, watching the white clouds drift across the sky, seemingly unbothered by Van and Ljubo's conversation.

"What do you think, Tisse?" Esta, who walked beside me, asked.

"If the goodly Cardinal has said so, then surely that is how it must be." I responded with a tepid answer to avoid any conflict.

"I see. Maybe I'll ask again in private when we've made camp."

Esta shrugged with a smile.

Maybe it was because of the mask, but her personality seemed a bit different from when I'd traveled together with her while she was Theodora. Mister Crawly Wawly's eyes also widened a bit as he beheld the woman.

"Hah. After nothing but their back-and-forth, I'd come to miss your reactions." Theodora would never have said something like that.

Mister Crawly Wawly tapped his legs as though intrigued. He seemed to have taken a liking to the woman's new demeanor.

We were currently behind the castle that had been stolen by Dundach, preparing to slay the hill giant.

"Umm, just to confirm, I am only here as a guide. Will it be a problem if I leave the fighting to all of you?"

"That should be fine. Right, Van?" Esta replied.

"That's what we agreed. However, if you see someone you can defeat, you are more than welcome to fight!"

"Welcome to fight?" Tisse echoed.

"Of course! It is a virtue to defeat monsters to strengthen your blessing! And that virtue is greater than any mortal contract!"

I felt wary of his innocent smile.

“Thank you; however, I don’t feel confident battling giants, so I’ll just hold a lantern for you all once we enter the castle.”

“I see. That’s a shame.” Van looked apologetic. “You must strive to grow stronger. God is always watching you.”

I don’t think I will ever come to like this Hero.

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Giants tended to have better night vision than humans.

It was gloomy in the castle, and the braziers filled with a nasty smelling oil were unlit.

With only the faint light that came through the windows, the hill giants could see as well as if it had been midday in an open field.

I stood at the rear of the group, following behind the others with a lantern raised. My sword was not drawn, but my goal was to learn more about Van the Hero and his party, not slaying giants.

“They’re coming!” the fairy named Lavender in Van’s cloak shouted.

Hill giants ran toward us, heads scraping the ceiling.

Also...

Crack!

...wood splintered as two more giants flew out from a side room. It was quite the surprise attack. How would this other Hero respond?

“Hahhhh!”

Van brandished his sword twice.

A pair of giants’ heads fell to the ground, spilling blood. Unconcerned about the splatter, Van smiled and shifted his sights to the next enemy. His sword was terrifically fast. To behead the monsters in a single cut spoke to a fair amount of skill.

He was indeed the Hero...and likely stronger than I was.

“Holy Blessing!”

Light shone from Ljubo’s hand, a clerical art that strengthened allies while weakening monsters within its glow.

“Now that it’s come to this, I suppose I’ll have to fight, too.”

Esta slew the hill giant nearest her with such deft spear work that I nearly forgot we were in a narrow corridor that should’ve made swinging a polearm difficult.

“Go, Vaaaaan! You can do it!”

Lavender darted all around the Hero while cheering him on.

She wasn’t actively fighting, but she seemed to act as a lookout, ensuring Van was never attacked from a blind spot.

And she seems to be watching me as surely as any monster...

Lavender didn't trust any humans other than Van.

"Van!" Lavender shouted.

There was a whooshing sound as an arrow the size of a lance sped toward the boy. Down at the end of the hall, there stood a hill giant a head taller than the others, wearing a helmet adorned with a feather—Dundach, most likely.

"Ah!"

Van deflected the arrow away with the shield in his left hand.

Dundach was holding a ballista designed for siege combat, a weapon likely left over from the castle's previous ruler.

Ordinarily, it required a winding lever to pull the bowstring back, but Dundach reset it quickly using his hill-giant strength.

A shot from that ballista couldn't be stopped by any normal shield, yet Van's didn't have so much as a scratch.

That was a powerful magic shield.

"The next one's coming!" Esta shouted as she prepared to defend using her clerical magic.

"Hmm. I thought these enemies were a bunch of nobodies, but this one's putting in some real effort!"

Before Esta could activate her spell, Van dashed down the hall and leaped at Dundach.

"Ugaa?!"

"I looked down on you, believing you were an unfaithful monster for holing up in a castle without killing people. Yet your murderous intent is marvelous!"

"What are you?!"

"One who defeats evil! I am Van the Hero! A monster like you ought to kill people more viciously and then be slain by me in turn!"

"Hero? Someone like you—"

Van beheaded Dundach before the giant could finish speaking.

"Evil has been vanquished."

The boy looked so pleased and at ease after killing the huge creature.

I see. So this is what being faithful to the Hero's impulses looks like...

Mister Crawly Wawly had never been frightened of Ruti, but he skittered from my shoulder to my bag after watching this Hero.

Quietly, he signaled to me, "Van is a scary human."

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I was spending the night alone on watch duty, staring at the fire. We'd made camp along the road.

"You can sleep, Mister Crawly Wawly."

He shook his head, however. I gently rubbed his stomach, and after he quivered happily, he leaned against my cheek.

“Mind if I sit next to you?” someone asked. I’d sensed her presence approaching, so I wasn’t surprised.

“Help yourself.”

At that, Esta took a spot near me. Then she set a tripod and pot over the fire. She seemed to be preparing a garlic soup. After a little while, steam began to rise.

“How about some dinner?”

“Thank you.”

Esta filled a cup with broth and handed it to me.

A sip revealed it was actually pretty tasty.

“...”

“Ljubo is fast asleep. He’s powerful, but he doesn’t have an adventurer’s mentality at all. Van and Lavender will be out hunting monsters all night like always to improve his blessing. They won’t be back until morning.”

It seemed clear Esta was implying that we wouldn’t be overheard.

“I don’t know how else to say it; that Hero is absurd.”

“I can’t disagree. Honestly, I’m glad for someone to discuss it with.” The masked woman smiled bitterly. “There were things I found difficult about traveling with Ruti, but... My time with Van has been really eye-opening.”

“Van appears quite faithful to his religion and the Hero’s impulses.”

“Well, the Hero is meant to be the manifestation of God’s providence... Still, I wonder if the first Hero was like that?”

“Whoever they were, they’re nothing but a legend now,” I replied.

“As stories passed through the generations, the more problematic episodes were likely removed. Hmmm...” Esta cocked her head. “What do you think?”

“I couldn’t begin to say. That’s not really my specialty.”

I did have a friend in the Assassins Guild who knew a lot about old stories, however. She might know something, but I had no idea what she was doing nowadays.

I took another drink of the soup and felt my body warm up a little.

“I never imagined you’d have an interest in cooking,” I said.

“Hah, I actually took the Cooking skill. After giving it a try, I realized just how hard it was to make food while camping, but it’s pretty fun.”

Esta sounded proud of herself. She truly had grown to be gentler and more sociable compared to her time as Theodora.

“Has Red rubbed off on you?”

“I guess so. I’m striving to be like he was...but it’s proving pretty difficult with this new Hero.”

Esta gave a self-deprecating smile. If someone had asked me to guide that Hero, I don’t know that I could’ve managed. Van believed in his Divine Blessing above all else.

The rogue assassins I’d fought recently had been that way, too. They trusted only their blessings and had lacked the mentality to operate as proper contract killers. They’d been skilled at their work once but had grown to be common murderers motivated solely by the joy of killing. Ultimately, Drog, fearing for his life, had even given up his client—a taboo in our world.

Van feels similar...

Suddenly, Mister Crawly Wawly started hopping up and down on my shoulder, making himself known.

Evidently, he wished to communicate something.

“Mister Crawly Wawly wants to ask if you’re going to leave Zoltan without talking to Albert,” I said.

“I would like to meet up with him if possible, but he wants to operate independently of Van. And truthfully, I’m afraid to leave Van alone while we’re in Zoltan. Whenever I take my eyes off him, something happens.”

“Sounds like you have it rough.”

“I guess...I do.” Esta’s reply felt keenly earnest. Looking at her, I realized I’d said something I should have kept to myself.

“Albert’s a bit lonely without you.” I intended the remark to be a joke. Albert *did* hope to see Esta, but I was playing it up a bit.

“I-I see, he’s lonely...and wishes to see me...”

Huh? Wait, wait, wait. What’s happening here?

There was no question that the ever-stern Theodora had softened a bit after donning a mask and becoming Escarlata. Yet that epitome of clerical solemnity and warrior rigidity was blushing and covering her mouth just like Rit!

“U-umm, if you see Albert, let him know that I’d like to see him, but the present situation prevents that. I certainly haven’t forgotten about him or anything... Wait, what am I saying? Sorry, please forget that.”

For a moment, I was so stunned that I forgot all about Van. That was sloppy of me.

Who would’ve thought something like this might happen. The world is truly a mysterious place.

Mister Crawly Wawly stood on the back of Esta’s hand and patted it with his forelegs to console the woman.



At noon the following day, Rit, Ruti, and I were sitting in the village plaza before a hastily assembled stage of wooden crates. We each had a plate of curry-fried fish.

Finding out that this food called curry could be used like this was a fun moment of discovery for me.

*“Log pullers, one and all.
Shoulders heavy and hips aching.
Yet our fathers trod here,
Dragging timbers, never breaking.
Surely, we can do the same.
And any with cause to complain,
Should dance and sing, dance and sing.”*

Villagers sang and danced to the melody of the lute and flute. The sound of their steps on the wooden boxes had a pleasant reverb to it, and it really made you want to get up and join them.

“Red, Rit, Ruti, please enjoy yourselves.”

The village elder gave us all cups with cider reserved for special occasions. It had been aged for four years.

Today was a feast to celebrate defeating the ogrekin and the village’s salvation. We were the guests of honor, and everyone was having a fun time.

“Zoltan doctors are strong. It’s inspirin’ to see.”

“It would be lovely if people like you came to live here. If you ever feel like working the fields away from the city, our door is always open.”

“Come by our spear training again, Mr. Red!”

People of all ages came to talk with us.

Saving villages and being celebrated by their inhabitants had been a thing of the past after we started taking it easy, but it really was nice to see everyone laughing and smiling.

“This isn’t so bad, every once in a while.”

I sipped the cider. It had a sweet tanginess like it had been made using sweet apples, but there was also a bitterness behind it. It was a pleasant drink.

“This is tasty.” Ruti looked into her cup as she swirled the cider. She wasn’t a big fan of alcohol, yet she appeared to enjoy this. “I don’t really like beer or whiskey, but I like fruit wines and cider.” She took another sip. “I want to enjoy alcohol that you like someday, Big Brother.”

“Well, for now, I think it’s safe to say we’re both fine with this.”

“Mhm. I’m glad.”

I drank a little more, and the two of us chuckled.

“Red!”

Hearing Rit’s voice, I looked up. She had left to get some more

food at some point and was calling for me.

“What is it?”

Ruti and I both headed over.

“This tastes really, really good.”

Rit had a fork in her right hand that she waved excitedly.

“What does?” I asked.

She was eating a kind of fried bread.

“They said this is the village’s best, most luxurious treat!”

“Oh, I see. White bread fried in oil. It does sound good.”

“And there’s a fragrant smell to it. This was made using good oil.”

Ruti and I both bit into the warm bread. The rich, flavorful sauce within spread over my tongue.

“Curry?!”

Now I understood why Rit was so excited.

This is tasty!

“White bread, quality oil, and curry sauce. Each is surely a precious ingredient in this village. I can see why it’s a rare commodity.”

“It’s precious, but it’s also a Sant Durant specialty, a luxury they can only make because all the ingredients are local.”

Ruti and I both savored the curry-filled bread. One bun was slightly larger than a fist, yet we both finished ours quickly.

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m glad you all liked our special treat,” one of the village women said, laughing. “Go on, now, we have more, so help yourselves to as many as you like!”

“Are you sure? Aren’t these kind of a rarity?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. This is Durant the hero’s village! I always dreamed of preparing our special bread for champions like our founder!”

The woman handed us each another bun filled with curry.

“Thanks to you, that dream has come true.”

She laughed again, while her neighbors sang. The village elder had climbed onto the stage at some point, hiked up her skirt, and was cutting loose with a magnificent tap dancing display.

People whistled with one hand and held mugs of cider in the other, cheering.

“This is nice,” Rit said, beaming.

Our vacation had been nothing but fun memories.

“Eeeeeek!”

A scream pierced the din of revelry.

“What is it?”

We immediately hurried to the source, noticing a horrible stench as we got closer.

“Ugh, this is awful!”

A woman hit by pegasus droppings looked utterly mortified. Peering into the sky, I spotted a group of the winged horses flying east.

“Looks like you’re fresh out of luck... Hey! What are you doing?!”

When a man laughed at the woman’s misfortune, she grabbed a clump of dung and flung it at his face.

“Who asked you! Now you’re out of luck!”

A crowd formed, keeping its distance but cracking up.

“Now that’s something you don’t see every day,” the village elder remarked.

Hmm?

“Is it rare for pegasi to fly over the village?”

“Yes, they live in distant fields to the west. This is the first I’ve seen any near Sant Durant.”

“The west...” That got me thinking.

“Red, what is it?”

“Well, after hearing that pegasi are an uncommon sight in these parts, I wondered if maybe the ogrekin were similar.”

“In what way?”

“If those ogrekin were connected to the ancient elf ruins, they should’ve kept closer to the village at the base of the mountains than here.”

“You’re right...”

Rit’s expression darkened.

And then, the sky darkened as well.

“What?!”

All manner of winged monsters and birds soared over the village, headed east. People watched dumbstruck at the sight.

Before we knew it, the odd migration had passed. The monsters left, and the sky was silent again.

“It’s like they’re running from something,” Ruti whispered.

I had a bad feeling about this.

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My name is Tisse Garland.

I’m an assassin in the Assassin’s Guild with the Assassin blessing, and my stomach presently aches from the tense atmosphere in the air.

“Er. Umm... What?”

“I’m telling you that your thanks is a nuisance.”

A cold sweat formed on the confused mayor’s brow as Van the Hero snapped at him sharply.

All of the gathered nobles of Zoltan were stunned and looked down glumly. Van’s rebuke was far too sharp and lacking in decorum

for the local movers and shakers of Zoltan, who'd hoped to celebrate the Hero's victory over Dundach.

Esta grimaced and shook her head. Even Cardinal Ljubo, with his ingratiating smile, went stiff. His eyes darted around awkwardly.

"Yeah! Yeah! Van's right!"

Lavender alone was unbothered, and her voice was the only one to break the silence in the Zoltan assembly.

What a horrible feeling.

As I was the type of person who really cared about the mood of a place, my stomach squirmed, and I desperately wanted to leave.

"...This is... Um, my apologies... We are simple country people far removed from the ways of Central... I fear we may have mistakenly done something to upset you, good Hero... I hope you can forgive us."

The mayor did his best to give an apology.

Esta hurriedly stepped forward before Van could open his mouth. "Unfortunately, we must be on our way as our quest is to defeat the demon lord. It pains us that we cannot accept your kindness, but please understand. We must depart immediately on the *Vendidad*, but we shall never forget your warm reception."

Esta lowered her head after her hasty explanation. She was attempting to smooth things over after Van's rude outburst.

"N-no, not at all. We understand! We were thoughtless not to consider the weight of the Hero's mission. All of Zoltan shall pray to Demis that your journey shall end in success."

Nobles' faces relaxed into smiles. Fortunately, it looked like things would end without a fuss.

"Now let's go." Esta turned to Van.

At last, Van the Hero would depart Zoltan, and the trouble would be over.

I breathed a little sigh of relief.

"The prayers of heretics fall on deaf ears."

Where did that come from?!

An icy chill fell upon the room.

Denying someone's beliefs was the ultimate insult. Everyone took their faith seriously to some extent. Everyone in the world was a follower of Demis. Tossing around the word *heretic* was dangerous.

Even Esta was at a loss for words, unable to conjure up a solution to keep the situation under control. She shot a look at Cardinal Ljubo, asking for help.

"V-Van, my boy, that really isn't an appropriate thing to say in a place like this. I'm sure you have your thoughts, but please apologize and take back what you said." Although uneasy, the cardinal did convey a sense of gravity in his words.

However, Van just smiled and shook his head. With anger and

sadness building from the assembled Zoltanis, Van remained his usual, cheerful, confident self, utterly bereft of any self-doubt.

"No, there is no need. I am a Hero who has trained as a devout. God granted me the Hero blessing in addition to Ruti's to correct this sort of heresy. I'm sure of it."

"*Heresy* is a strong word, Van." Even Cardinal Ljubo was losing his patience.

Mayor Tornado's face was paling as he struggled to conceal his outrage.

What is Van hoping to achieve with this?

Van held up his hands, still grinning.

"If you are not possessed of an evil Divine Blessing, then there is but one thing that you should do!" The boy weathered the confusion and animosity, untroubled, basking in it. "Join us in fighting the demon lord's armies! To remain here in Zoltan is to turn your backs on God's teachings!"

"Wh-what?"

"All people with righteous gifts from the almighty must gather and stand before the demon lord's army! Living without meaning in a place like this is a sin against God!"

"Without meaning?!"

"It is written in scripture that sloth is a sin. And the sloth you have committed is the gravest of all. You have abandoned the roles set for you by God, and for that, you must repent. With the Hero's advent, you bear a sacred duty to fight and vanquish evil."

"...Do you think anyone here would want to join you after the scorn you've shown us? We have a homeland to protect and our own lives to lead. I'm afraid we cannot meet your expectations." Mayor Tornado's voice trembled. He could barely restrain his fury.

Van didn't seem to react in any way to the anger or rejection. He grinned the same way he always did. It was unnerving.

"Just leave your country. What value is there in a nation in the middle of nowhere?"

"This is a proud land that our forefathers worked hard to build. Hero or not, you've gone too far!!!"

"Etiquette is a thing that governs mortal relationships, but I am speaking of God's holy word."

Mayor Tornado and the Zoltan nobles glared at the boy, having abandoned any effort to mask their rage. I was just as upset as they were.

Ruti, Red, and the others all loved this place and thought Zoltan was great, too. The slow life I knew here was filled with precious memories.

I focused myself, prepared to draw my sword at any moment to

stop Van if he attempted to harm the mayor.

Yet not even Mayor Tornado's words seemed to give his smile cause to falter.

"That is unfortunate. I shall pray that you someday recover your faith."

Van turned to leave. "Please give me a little time before we depart," he said to his party members.

"What are you going to do?"

Van's eyes shone with hope as he answered Esta's question. "I believe I just had a revelation about my duties as a Hero. I must act in order to save this world."

"What are you..."

"I am going to use the Fairy King's Shield."

"Don't be stupid! Ljubo and I told you that is not to be used!"

"To stand by and do nothing in the face of such heresy is a sin."

"W-wait!"

Van dashed off, ignoring Esta's warning. She frantically gave chase but was confronted by a tiny figure with her hands raised.

"Don't get in Van's way!"

"Move, Lavender! Van is going to attempt something terrible, the sort of thing a Hero should never do."

"I agree. But so what? I like Van, so everything he chooses is right by me!"

"Gh...! You should never have joined the party!"

"I don't care what you think of me. I've got Van's love! So what'll it be? You want to fight?"

"..."

The little fairy that rode on Van's shoulder was summoning incredibly dense magic power.

"Ah, Esta. Stop it."

"Cardinal Ljubo!"

"I agree that Van's course of action is problematic, but this will be a valuable learning opportunity. A mistake will be good for him, and fortunately, it's only the backwater Republic of Zoltan. A few losses here won't harm the Hero's reputation."

Cardinal Ljubo shook his head, as if this were a minor hassle. Then he sat in a chair and pulled out a cigar.

"Does anyone have a light? Eh, I'll do it myself." Fishing around in his cloak for a moment, the cardinal retrieved a match.

"You stay put, too, Tisse. I'll kill you if you get in Van's way," Lavender stated coldly.

"Fairies aren't exactly my specialty, but..."

This was more than some common sprite. Red would've deduced her abilities immediately. Were he here, perhaps I could've employed

a better strategy.

I regretted not knowing more about fairies, but reached for my sword hilt.

“You really wanna do this?” Lavender spat.

“...”

I did not know what she was capable of, but seeing that Esta hesitated was enough to tell me this was dangerous.

However, my friends were a lot more reliable than some great fairy.

I knew I could entrust things to them.

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A thread ran out from the hall, carrying Tisse’s signal.

Mister Crawly Wawly could sense the vibrations through his web as keenly as if he were present in the room.

Atop his pigeon friend, he soared to Yarandrala and Danan.

No matter how powerful a magic user was, they wouldn’t notice a spider.

A tremor happened to pass down a thin strand, and then a pigeon took flight. That was all. That there happened to be an arachnid riding the bird was of no importance, surely. Even for someone who could sense blessings, Mister Crawly Wawly was only a run-of-the-mill Warrior.

However, that spider was a hero in Zoltan, trusted by the strongest girl in the world.

Chapter 5

The Trials of the Hero

The road between the harbor district and working class section of town was crowded with merchants, craftsmen, day laborers, and more. They were doing some evening shopping after work, heading to cheap taverns, or merely making their way home.

Such bustle was nothing compared to the capital, of course, but this was still one of Zoltan's busiest streets. And an armor-clad boy with a sword at his waist was standing right in the middle of the thoroughfare. It was a horrible nuisance, but he was an unfamiliar outsider and equipped for battle, so no one said anything. He ignored the numerous irked glares cast his way.

"All right."

Van raised his shield.

It was a treasure he'd claimed from the salt dragons' lair—the Fairy King's Shield.

The object had been ensorcelled with many powers, one of which was the spell Send Suggestion.

The effect spread low-strength mind control magic over a wide area using telepathy. It wasn't powerful enough to seize someone's mind completely, and it couldn't force them to commit suicide or fall in love with another whom they didn't care for.

All it could do was suggest. The spell whispered in the back of the mind, asking "Wouldn't it be better if you did this?"

If an affected individual immediately refused, then the power dissipated. However, the low potency of the spell gave it certain benefits over mightier magic like Dominate.

Mind control magic was very prone to being resisted, and the effects only lasted for a short while. Although Dominate was a high-level spell, it couldn't affect any at or above the user's level. Even if it succeeded, its effects wore off after a minute. This severely limited its uses. Weaker mind control spells could still be defied, and their potency expired just as quickly. However, because the manipulation was minor, a person wouldn't realize they'd been affected, so long as the order was a natural one.

Someone unaware they were being controlled couldn't resist, and even after the magic faded, they'd continue to act as instructed because they believed it to be their choice.

"Esta said never to use this, but to ignore such a wonderful power would be strange."

Van sensed great possibility from the shield. He believed that all heretics were misfortunate and that the shield held the power to save and guide them back to the path of righteous faith. What reason could there be not to use it?

Esta claimed there was no value in belief brought on by magic. A prayer was a prayer, though. What difference in value was there to God? Inquisitors used the lash to draw out faith. Whether by words, agony, or spell, human thought had no meaning when paired against God's love. All that mattered was that everything existed in accordance with the Divine Blessings—the proof of God's divine benevolence.

Van activated the Fairy King's Shield.

His message was to be "Summon your courage and fight the demon lord's army with the Hero."

Undoubtedly, everyone here should have considered that notion before. All these people had surely wondered if it was right for them to laze about peacefully while others fought in distant lands. The Fairy King's Shield would give them the courage to live according to God's will.

The Hero was a Divine Blessing meant to save the world. That was why it stirred people to fight, to expend their lives. It was all in service of God's design.

Ahhh, what a wonderful world.

Holding the shield up, he shouted his command.

"Summon your courage and fight the demon lord's army with the Hero." The outburst gathered many eyes, and the shield gleamed.

"Thorn Bind!"

However, before the magic could finish, vines wrapped around Van.

"?!"

The boy's body was ensnared, and the spell failed.

"That's far enough, Hero."

"Who are you?!"

A female high elf wielding a staff emerged from the crowd.

"Just a woman living in Zoltan." Yarandrala flashed a fearless smile. "In every land, the use of mind control on a citizen is a serious crime. You must know that."

"Divine law supersedes that of mortals. Nothing takes precedence over faith."

“What a cruel Hero. I’m not really too big on laws, but I can’t abide this kind of villainy.”

“You impede the Hero, call the Hero a villain... You speak evil while masquerading as righteous.”

“Honestly, I’m not much for religion, but it stings a bit to be derided so.”

“I am Van the Hero! Destroyer of evil!”

The boy poured strength into his body.

“Did you forget that you’re caught in my vines? Struggling is going to hurt!”

“Grahhhhhh!!!”

Van’s face twisted in anguish. Yarandrala was relieved to see he didn’t possess Resistance to Pain like Ruti.

“Hrahhhhhhh!!!”

Van tore the vines apart, evidently not bothered that he shredded his flesh by doing so. Blood ran from the many wounds on his limbs.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

People fled from the terrible scene.

Van bled all over, but still smiled as he drew his sword. Hope shone in his expression—a look befitting the Hero.

“Now the Hero shall defeat the villain!”

“...”

Yarandrala braced herself and readied her staff. Van’s blessing was immature yet, but he was still the Hero.

There...!

Yarandrala guarded, deflecting the boy’s holy sword.

This strength!

Van’s sword attacks already rivaled the greatest champions.

Yarandrala hadn’t entered this battle carelessly, yet she now understood that she had to take this more seriously. Anything less would spell defeat.

“Weed Sting!”

Yarandrala’s spell caused a plant with razor-sharp leaves to sprout. Ordinarily, it should have been impossible to use any magic during a furious exchange of blows, making a small trick like this unexpected and dangerous.

“Gh?!”

The plant cut into Van’s legs through gaps in his armor. The keen leaves had been strengthened by Yarandrala’s power, slicing all the way to Van’s muscles. Seizing upon that opening, the high elf leaped back to summon her most powerful spell, Tyrant Spirit.

However...

Clang!

Yarandrala's staff was knocked upward.



Van had dashed forward to deliver a rising cut, unconcerned with the state of his legs.

Oh no!

Yarandrala's defense had been broken in an instant. With nothing to stop him, Van brought his weapon down at her neck. Yet halfway through the arc, the boy suddenly felt his blade grow heavy.

"Nice one, spider!"

A large shadow flew through the air.

"Martial Art: Meteor Kick!"

A heel sped forward like an arrow.

Van reflexively protected himself with his shield, but the strike blew him away.

A man gracefully flipped backward to land on his feet.

"That got a bit close."

"Danan!"

"One-on-one against the Hero'd be rough, right? Figured I'd lend a hand."

Danan wore a ferocious smile as he raised his left hand and assumed a combat stance.

"He's strong. I almost thought I was done for there."

"Yeah, I can tell just lookin' at him."

Danan watched the Hero carefully. Van was well and truly bloodied, but he stood and raised his sword regardless.

"Why doesn't he heal himself? The Hero should have access to Healing Hands, right?"

"Who knows."

"No matter how incredible he is, being all torn up like that has to hurt."

Van grinned, caked in dark red. "Two powerful villains! But I am the Hero. The Hero will not yield to evil!"

"I see. You draw motivation from faith in your blessing." Danan exhaled and lowered his center of gravity. "I bet you've never known any sort of failure, so you can't imagine that your conviction might be wrong. In which case, a proper ass-kicking and a nose fracture for good measure should do the trick. Hope you're ready, Mister Hero!"

"Almighty Demis, please guide me in battle!"

Danan and Van dashed forward at the same time.

"Martial Art: Tiger King's Claw!"

"Martial Art: Holy Blade!"

Van's ability empowered his blade with a holy aura, increasing its reach. However, Danan had leaped over the boy to deliver his attack.

Van's sword caught empty air, and Danan's fist struck the Hero's shield.

"I'll support you!"

Yarandrala fired off a thorny seed like an arrow.

Had Van guarded against the high elf's spell instead of Danan's attack, he would have undoubtedly been defeated. Knowing that, Van elected not to defend against Yarandrala's projectile. Barbs pierced his left eye, yet he slashed at Danan without flinching.

"Hah, that's a bad move!"

Now blind in one eye, Van could no longer perceive depth. Thus he was unable to dodge when Danan hurled a punch his way. Buckling at last, the Hero struggled to stay on his feet.

"Gah... Hahhh... It hurts... But...the Hero doesn't fall...Healing Hands Mastery: Reversal."

Light shone from Van's body.

"Wh...?"

"Danan?!"

The burly Martial Artist jumped away, clutching his left eye as blood erupted from all over his body.

"This is the first time I've fought such powerful foes! You are truly worthy of being the Hero's enemies!" Van sounded excited. And all of his injuries had vanished.

"I'll heal you!" Yarandrala used spirit magic to mend her friend's cuts.

"...What was that?" Danan demanded.

"Amazing. That really hurt me, but you endure it like nothing at all."

"Transferring wounds hardly seems like a power fit for the Hero."

"What would a villain like you know about being the Hero? That was Reversal, an ability granted by mastering the Hero's unique inherent skill, Healing Hands."

"Reversal?"

"Healing Hands allows me to heal someone using my own magic power and vitality, so its culmination is the free control and distribution of those energies. Reversal allows me to use another's vitality to regenerate. And since Healing Hands is a restorative skill, not an attack, its damage can't be prevented."

"What's so heroic about that?"

"With this skill, I can turn things around no matter the situation! The Hero shall never give in, no matter how mighty the evil!"

"You're babblin' about how you'll never quit while goin' around pushing your pain onto everyone else?" Danan spat blood. Yarandrala was still tending to his injuries. "Even an idiot like me can tell you're no Hero."

"It is Almighty Demis who gave me this path. You deny the word of God. There is no greater heresy, and, as the Hero, I cannot forgive

such evil!”

Van raised his sword again and ran forward. Yarandrala raised her staff in response.

“Van’s skill is too strong against a Martial Artist! I’m taking over!”

“Ah? You tellin’ me to turn tail now just ‘cause of that?! No way!!!”

Danan and Yarandrala stood shoulder to shoulder, ready to face Van.

Suddenly, the sky darkened.

“What’s happening?”

A dragon’s roar thundered over Zoltan.

Danan, Yarandrala, and Van all stopped fighting to look up.

“Shit, this is bad! Summon something, quick!” Danan barked.

Fortunately, Yarandrala had already been working a spell. “I know! Heed my call, Tyrant Spirit!”

The ground shattered, and the spirit of a giant, mighty tree emerged.

The powerful spirit spread its body to catch the flames that rained from the heavens.

“Damn. It’s a salt dragon...!”

Yarandrala’s powerful spirit crumbled as it was buffeted by the salt dragon’s corrosive breath.

Salt dragons were creatures of stagnation and destruction, capable of corroding plant life and metal. Dozens of them crowded the sky, glaring below with cloudy, pearl-like eyes.

“My plants won’t be much use against those monsters!” Yarandrala exclaimed.

“Don’t get in our way while we’re busy dealin’ with the Hero!” Danan roared at the circling dragons.

They didn’t seem interested in Danan at all, however. All of their attention was directed at Van the Hero.

“Thou, who slew our brethren and stole our treasure, shall know our wrath and suffer our vengeance!”

“Evil dragons! So, you’re here to take back my shield!”

Van patted the item in question.

The salt dragons bared their fangs and roared. “That is ours, sneakthief!”

Flames gathered in the creatures’ maws.

Danan scowled. “Damn it! I can’t stop all of them in time! Sorry, Yarandrala, you gotta defend the town with your spirit while I take care of them!”

“Got it!”

The high elf wasted no time, preparing a summoning again.

“You’re mine!” Van leaped forward, sword poised to strike at

Yarandrala's neck.

"You piece of shit!!!" Danan's fist collided with the Hero, sending him flying back.

A second great tree spirit arose, blocking the corrosive flame.

"Aww. I was so close." Even now, Van was grinning.

"Isn't the Hero supposed to be incapable of abandoning people in danger?!"

"This, too, is Demis's will. God loves the faithful and heretical alike. If salt dragons destroy Zoltan, then its slothful people will be motivated to fight the demon lord's army. Evil monsters exist to serve the almighty, too, just as it was written in the scripture! I am the Hero. I shall not abandon anyone! I will even save heretics!"

"Spare me the crazy talk, you bastard! I'm gonna beat you to death!"

Danan's face was twisted in fury as he leveled his fist at Van.

Dozens of dragons swarmed in the sky, and people were fleeing in terror.

Van brought those dragons... What a mess...

Yarandrala was positively indignant but kept cool enough to recognize that the situation demanded her attention.

I'm no match for the salt dragons' corrosive breath, and Danan won't have much success against Van's abilities... But we have no choice but to win!

The great spirit's body paled and crumbled, eaten away by salt.

A single blast will devastate the city!

If Yarandrala allowed an attack to get by, it would mean widespread destruction. This was why salt dragons had come to be feared as destroyers of civilization.

"Red...", Yarandrala whispered to herself.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"What?!"

"Lightning Speed."

A bronze sword streaked through Zoltan's streets.

"Wh-?!"

Van blocked the sharp attack from this new enemy, yet something managed to stab into his hand gripping the shield.

"Gh!" Van's dauntless expression cracked a bit, and his brow tensed. Blood seeped from his left arm.

"Guess it's a good thing I never gave Rit this knife back." Red had cut into Van's arm using a small blade carried in his off hand.

"What are you doing?!" the Hero cried. The wound wasn't deep, and Van saw little value in transferring the damage with Reversal, so he opted to attack instead.

Clunk!

However, Van swiftly discovered his shield was caught on something.

“Ah!”

The knife had cut the shield’s strap so quickly that Van, a first-rate swordsman, hadn’t noticed.

Van frantically grabbed after the item, but he was too late.

“Nice! Perfect timing!”

Mister Crawly Wawly, who rode on Red’s back, jumped in evident joy.

Spider thread reeled in the Fairy King’s Shield, and Red quickly grabbed it.

Van slashed wildly to reclaim his shield, but Red deflected each strike using the very item he’d stolen.

“Trying to block with my sword likely would’ve only shattered the blade.”

The Hero’s blows were tremendously powerful but careless and unrefined. Van’s stance was broken when his full-strength slashes were batted away.

“I’m not done!!!” roared the Hero. He touched the ground to steady himself, then charged at Red. To Van’s surprise, however, the object of his anger had vanished.

“He’s gone?!”

By the time Van had righted himself, Red’s Lightning Speed had carried him far from the range of any sword.

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“Phew.”

I slowed to a stop on the road north from Zoltan.

I’d been watching the skies ever since we saw those monsters fleeing. Upon spotting the salt dragons moving from the west, I used Lightning Speed to rush back to Zoltan.

I inspected the Fairy King’s Shield. Van must have taken something precious for salt dragons to come all the way to Zoltan. And an examination of the shield confirmed it had never belonged to any fairy king.

Overhead, the salt dragons previously circling Zoltan were pursuing me.

That was to be expected, since they only wanted their stolen shield. Thankfully, this would keep them from damaging Zoltan.

I also spied Van running along the road after the dragons.

“He’s pretty fast. I guess he can use magic to boost speed.”

Danan and Yarandrala were chasing him.

“I couldn’t have drawn the dragons and Van away from town

without you, Mister Crawly Wawly.”

The spider was currently taking shelter in a pouch on my hip.

After passing Tisse’s message to Yarandrala and Danan, he’d contacted all his little animal friends using another thread and had them guide me to the fight. Mister Crawly Wawly had linked up with me when I rushed in and, without any planning beforehand, helped me snatch the shield away from Van.

He really is reliable.

“Now it’s up to me to make the best of all your efforts.”

A dragon’s roar echoed, and a salt dragon landed before me.

“The shield in thine hands belongs to us, human. Return it.”

“Of course, that’s what I came here to do.” I held out the item in offering. “This isn’t some piece of fairy smithing, is it? It was made using knowledge from the dark continent. I imagine you have always been the rightful owners.”

“...Indeed. This was bequeathed to us by the original demon lord.” The dragon received the shield and closed its eyes for a moment. “We are the guardians who protect this shield in preparation of the demon lord’s return. Such is our covenant.”

The salt dragon spread its wings to rejoin the others in the air.

“You have our gratitude, human.”

The dragons roared and made for the western horizon.

It was fortunate and a genuine relief that they left without much issue. I’d worried they’d want revenge for their brethren who fell to Van.

“Now then, all that’s left is the Hero.”

I raised my sword as Van leaped into the air.

“Martial Art: Holy Blade!!!”

A radiant sword came crashing down toward me.

I dodged by leaning back, letting the slash pass in front of me. Van’s attack left a huge, blackened cleft in the road.

He could have just cut horizontally. Seems he doesn’t care if he destroys the road.

He didn’t appear to spare much consideration for the problems he’d cause for those who traveled this way.

“As a Hero, I think you come up short.”

“Another heretic!”

Van tried a rising slash after his downswing, but...

“There.”

...I pressed my sword against his.

His replica of the Holy Demon Slayer was far stronger than my bronze sword, and Van was a capable foe. I would’ve had trouble parrying a cut from a blade that powerful.

However, even a simple bronze sword could catch a holy weapon

before it had momentum.

“Y-you! Let me go!”

Van tried to free himself from the bind, but my blade moved in time with his, all but clinging to it.

No matter how keen a blade, it was impotent if it could not be brought to bear.

“I bet you can’t use that Reversal ability unless I attack you directly, right?”

“Quit defending and fight me properly!”

“You seem to have raised your blessing level, but you lack genuine combat discipline.”

“Paltry maneuvers concocted by mortals are as nothing before the power of the Divine Blessing granted by Almighty Demis!”

“Ah, so you’re one of those types, huh? That explains why you let yourself be lured away from town, far from the rest of your party.”

“If my sword doesn’t work, then I can just use magic!”

The instant Van tried to form a seal, I pushed against my sword to knock him off-balance.

“Ah!”

Van was unable to maintain his spell, and it dissipated.

“Trying magic at close range is a poor tactic.”

“What do you hope to gain by stalling?! The Hero can fight all through the night without breaking a sweat!”

I didn’t intend to hold him at bay that long. Keeping Van occupied for a minute was already more than enough.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Big Brother.”

A girl appeared behind Van: Ruti.

“Who are you?!”

“Not anyone worth remembering. Please just forget about us tomorrow.”

There was a bang, and the air shuddered. Ruti’s fist struck Van square in the face.

“Ghahhhhhhhhhh!!!”

The boy went flying.

One thundering boom sounded after another. His body broke through several trees, dug into the ground, and finally came to stop in a massive cloud of dust far in the distance.

“Whoa,” I couldn’t help but mutter. Even with the Divine Blessing of the Hero, Van was definitely down for the count now. “His comrades are coming. We should leave before they see us.”

“Okay,” Ruti answered, staring at Van, collapsed in the distance. “If it were me, I think I’d want to leave Zoltan after that.”

“Yeah, he’s already recovered the *Vendidad*, and the dragons have departed with the demon lord’s shield. There’s no reason to stick

around. The Hero's goal is to defeat the demon lord."

That was the best decision.

Although the Hero's journey involved many life-threatening perils, it was not a quest that demanded its champion risk their life for no reason. The Hero's existence sparked courage in people's hearts, and so too would their death steal that bravery away.

"But..."

After crossing blades with Van and speaking with him, I felt like I'd gleaned something about the person behind the blessing.

He would remain in Zoltan... I was sure of it.



Epilogue

One Who Guides the Hero

Blood pooled on the ground and soaked into the earth.

Van lay on the ground, thinking about what had happened as his body grew cold.

Death was near.

Van the Hero has been defeated—completely and totally.

That much is fine. The Hero is meant to fight evil, but they don't have to win.

Van knew that God desired the effort to reach victory, not the end result.

History had a plethora of righteous Divine Blessings that had fallen to evil ones.

Demis was all-knowing and all-powerful, meaning his plan couldn't be for the Hero to triumph over the demon lord. If it were, then the Hero would never lose.

"Vannnnnn!!!!!!!" someone shrieked. "Oh, how awful! Hold on, Van!"

"I'll cast Regenerate!"

Van realized it was Lavender and Ljubo. However, he wasn't interested in them.

My only goal was to fulfill the Hero's role. That was what I believed in above all else. How should I interpret this situation?

With Ljubo's magic, Van's broken arm was able to move again. The boy slowly brought his hand over his face.

Something felt hot, and his fingers sank unnaturally into his cheek.

Van thought about what had happened with a detached perspective, as if he were a distant observer.

"Healing Hands."

Radiant light surrounded the Hero, restoring him from the brink of death.

"Van!" Lavender clung to his neck as he sat up. "Are you okay? That must have hurt, right? I'm sorry! I won't ever leave your side again!"

Van didn't respond, however. He didn't so much as look at her. His restored eyes shone brightly as he looked into the sky with a smile.

"Yes! Now I understand!"

"Van...?"

"I will kill that blue-haired girl. And once my Hero blessing absorbs the blessing that she has nourished through her life, I will become the true Hero!"

"Van, what are you talking about?" Ljubo was perplexed, but Van didn't feel the need to explain to the cardinal he so respected.

"Our Lord is come! Aha, aha-ha-ha, aha-ha-ha-ha!!!"

Ljubo recoiled in fear at Van's heavy laughter.

"I don't get it, but I'll support you no matter what, Van!"

Lavender clung to the boy as she always did.

Heedless of his comrades, Van grinned wide, truly elated.

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After returning to Zoltan, we all gathered in Ruti's mansion.

"Sorry I'm late."

Esta opened the door and stepped inside.

"I'd heard the stories, but I'm still surprised you started wearing a mask."

"It suits me, doesn't it?"

Rit and I paused, slightly taken aback by the joke. Perhaps our reaction was amusing, because Esta smiled.

"Hey, this ain't the time to be screwing around."

Danan was in a foul mood. Their personalities had flip-flopped compared to the old days.

"Sorry, I was glad to have the chance to meet you all again."

Ruti, Danan, Yarandralla, Tisse, Albert, Rit, and I were all present. Esta looked to each of us in turn, evidently pleased.

"Okay, I can't stay long, so let's get down to the matter at hand." Esta pulled up a seat. "Van's wounds were completely healed by Cardinal Ljubo's healing spell and his own Healing Hands. He has no lingering issues, either."

"His spirit wasn't broken?" Danan asked.

"No, the Hero does not feel fear," Esta replied.

"But he can experience failure. He looks like the sort who hasn't ever really hit a wall. I figured getting beaten into the dirt would've imparted some kind of impression."

"...Van doesn't think he failed."

"Even after losing that badly?"

"He smiled."

“Gah! That kid seriously pisses me off!” Danan roared as he hit his fist and stump together. “I want a rematch! Lemme kill him, and that’ll be the end of things!”

“Calm down,” I fired back. “He’s the church’s Hero. If he died in Zoltan, the church’s people would come crawling out of the woodwork to investigate things.”

“What a pain in the ass!”

Danan’s face twisted as he tried to control his outrage.

“So, what is Van going to do now?” I asked Esta.

“He’s convinced himself that his duty as the Hero is to kill Ruti.”

Wait, what?

“He’s after Ruti?”

My chest grew hot suddenly.

“Oh? You getting fired up, too?! Let’s go kill this guy together!”

Danan sounded thrilled.

It was true that if Van intended to hurt Ruti, I wouldn’t hesitate to draw my sword.

Rit frantically tried to calm me. “Wait a second, Red!”

Thanks to her, I snapped back to myself. *No good, that was a little too impulsive of me.*

“Some things never change.” Esta sounded a little astounded, or maybe exasperated.

I sniffed, a bit irked.

“There is definitely cause for worry, but we have a week before anything happens, at the very least.”

“What do you mean?”

“Van is venturing to the south seas to hunt monsters and increase his level. The trip is also intended as a test voyage to learn how the *Vendidad* operates.”

“The south seas... I suppose that’s the closest location to Zoltan with high-level monsters.”

“We leave port tomorrow. Albert and I will be going with Van.”

“Will you two be all right?”

“A couple allies on the inside can’t hurt, right? I think we’ll manage.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning on fighting Van,” Esta assured. “I just need to confront that failure of a Hero.”

Failure of a Hero, huh?

His faith in Demis and his Divine Blessing were strong. Could he really be convinced of anything?

“If we’re going to try something, it would be better to go after his comrades instead of him.”

Everyone else nodded at that.

“Esta, how much do you know about Cardinal Ljubo and the fairy Lavender?”

“Ljubo’s goal is to use Van to advance his personal glory, to be one of the people who saved the world.”

“So then fighting Ruti is a diversion, and in his eyes, it’s a needless risk. That might give us some leeway with him.”

A rapacious cardinal would be a lot easier to deal with than a martyr Hero.

“Lavender doesn’t have any particular goals. She just loves Van and acts only for his sake.”

“So if we get her to understand Van’s life would be in danger, we might be able to sway her, too.”

If it was to protect the person she loved, Lavender might even be willing to aid us. “So we persuade Van’s party members, then we get them to convince him to become a Hero for the people and not for Demis. That’s the current plan.”

“In which case, Rit and I will be crucial. Van doesn’t know Rit, and I haven’t taken any aggressive action against him,” Tisse interjected.

I was a little surprised by the remark. I looked to Rit, who nodded reassuringly.

“I’m fine with getting involved. I was once an adventurer called Rit the hero, and I should live up to that title.”

“We’ll be facing the Hero and his party, though... They’re powerful enemies.”

“I get that you’re worried, Red, but I worry about you and Ruti just as much! I want to help.”

“...Right, sorry. I wasn’t thinking pragmatically.”

“It’s okay. I like that strategic side of you, but I love your kind side.”

Tense as the situation was, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful Rit’s smile was. My heart skipped a beat.

“Looks like the two of you are getting on just fine.” Esta was smiling.

“Sorry, we were in the middle of an important conversation, and I just...”

“No, don’t worry about it. Love is a good thing.”

Danan, who’d been watching Esta, looked astonished. “Ruti, Gideon, Tisse, Rit, Theodora... Everyone’s changed. Are Yarandrala and I the only ones who haven’t?”

“Oh? I’m just a peaceful high elf living a slow and simple life now, thank you very much.”

“That right? Then who did I see sneaking off in disguise to fight in Zoltan’s colosseum? Didn’t you kick the ass of that third-ranked spear

fighter with your bare hands? You're the same as you ever were, the sort who balances peace and war."

"Oops, I wasn't aware anyone knew about that." Yarandralla looked away, feigning embarrassment.

She really just can't keep from getting involved in everything.

"But, y'know, change doesn't seem so bad." Danan's expression suddenly turned serious. "This whole Hero problem isn't gonna go away by whaling on him, right? Our plan calls for a different kind of strength, and I don't have a damn clue what to do."

Danan was right; this was a different sort of fight from the many in our shared past.

"Before, we worked to free Ruti from her Hero blessing... This time, it's something like the opposite. We need to guide Van into becoming a true Hero."

I would've preferred if we could solve everything without getting involved with Van, but it was beginning to look like a clash with this new Hero was inevitable.

Guide and Hero.

I felt a bit uneasy, and I wondered if this was Demis's will.

Regardless, my path was clear.

"It won't be easy... But I know we can do it!"

""""Yeah!!!"""" Everyone responded emphatically.

I've found some truly dependable friends.

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Evening, Zoltan.

Red & Rit's Apothecary.

"We're hooooome!"

"We certainly are."

Rit and I had returned home after being gone for a while.

"Yarandralla kept the shop in pretty good order. I don't see any dust."

"She loves cleaning."

"How were sales? Do you think she knew to keep accounts? Ah, maybe she didn't get around to it since she was busy dealing with Van."

"Yarandralla used to run a flower shop. She's got experience with handling finances."

"Really? Ah, the medicine stocks have run pretty low. Yarandralla might know a lot about plants, but without the Alchemy skill, she can't produce many remedies."

Rit looked to be having fun inspecting things. Something about it was indescribably pleasant for me to watch.

“The vacation in Sant Durant was fun, but I feel so calm now that we’re back.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. This is our home, after all.”

I hugged Rit close. I could feel her arms squeezing me tight, too.

This. This house, this town. This was the world I wanted to protect.

The Divine Blessing of the Hero could stand in my way, and God could disapprove, but I had no intention of backing down.

Such was the decision I came to while enveloped in Rit’s gentle warmth.

Afterword

Thank you, everyone who picked up this book! I'm the author, Zappa.

Because of the book layout, the afterword has to be a single page this time. I announced it in Episode 0 already, but this is the first word of it in a main story afterword: The novels will receive anime and video game adaptations! Yup, some of you may already be aware, but the series is getting both!

Hooray!

This is all because of the readers who've supported this series so faithfully. I'm truly grateful.

Now, let's talk about the events in this latest volume.

The story has entered a new arc, and Van the Hero and his party have joined the stage.

A Hero who fiercely believes in Divine Blessings and the traditional world order is, simply put, Ruti's exact opposite. His comrades are a power-hungry cardinal, a fairy who's blindly in love, and a wise masked knight...

The Hero will form the central theme of the next book in the series, so please look forward to seeing how Red and friends handle this new Hero's party!

Zappa

Warming up thanks to a powerful heater, 2021

This is Yasumo.
The illustrations were a joy to do!
I hope to see you again!



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